

Why does Corruption Appear to be “Unavoidable”?
- Tacit Rationality and the Reinforcement of Informal Institutions in China

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Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Zusammenfassung</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction	1
Topic and Hypothesis	1
Theories of Corruption in View of Hypothesis	5
Research Significance	19
Chapter 1 Theoretical Framing and Methodological Approach	27
1.1 Theoretical Framing of the Research	27
1.2 Applying Tacit Rationality to Explaining Corruption in China: An Alternative View of the Reinforcement of Informal Institutions, Cooperative Commitment and Transactional Corruption	40
1.3 Methodological Approach: Critical Discourse Analysis	50
Chapter 2 Perceiving the Idealised Values Associated with CPC Cadres' Multiple Roles through a Critical Examination of Official and Unofficial Discourses about Corruption	65
2.1 Loyalty to the Party Organisation Associated with the Cadres' Political Role	72
2.2 Renqing and Mianzi Associated with the Cadres' Social Role	79
2.3 Equivalent Exchange Principle Associated with the Cadres' Economic Role	86
Chapter 3 How do Cadres Totalise Different Idealised Values? – The Structure and Expressive Capacity of the Corruption-inclusive Informal Institutional Complex	93
3.1 A Soul Character in Each Group and a Delicate Art of Naming	94
3.2 Favour Exchange as Symbolic Social Action rather than Habitus or Goal	98
3.2 Symbolic Meaning Embodied in the Selection of Counterpart, Object and Means	101
Chapter 4 Participant Observation of a Constructive Drinking – A Live Example of the Establishment and Rationalisation of a Potential Corrupt Exchange Network	109
Conclusion	149
<i>Appendix</i>	<i>163</i>
<i>List of References</i>	<i>173</i>

Abstract

This dissertation aims at disentangling an empirical puzzle: Why does corruption – especially in forms of transaction – appear to be “unavoidable”? Building upon my research on the case of China, I argue that when corruption becomes an expected action that goes beyond individual choice, “unavoidable” does not signify legally-identified instances of corruption per se, but a series of informal institutions which do not exclude corruption. The crux of understanding why people consciously break or bypass formal constraints is to explain why certain informal patterns of behaviour sharing similar operating logic with corruption are constantly getting reinforced while formally-coded rules appear to be merely nominal. Ultimately, behind the empirical puzzle of “unavoidable” corruption lies the theoretical inquiry into what determines the effectiveness of an institution, which entails a frame that can link the analysis of an individual decision-making process to the larger social contextual structure. To address the question, I propose a thesis that incorporates Mannheim’s relationist view of thinking, Polanyi’s idea about the tacit knowing and Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to social interaction. I suggest that the reinforcement of corruption-inclusive informal institutions could be accounted for by their compliance with tacit rationality – a deep rationalising-oriented reasoning that helps to sustain the smooth operation of cooperative interaction. Specifically, what justifies an institution is not certain given legal or moral criterion but the meaning it helps to convey. As Goffman indicated, all social subjects are performers – “merchants of morality” – and an institution can be seen as a set of expressive equipment whose effectiveness comes from its capacity of expressing idealised values. There is no such thing as absolute rightness or truth, but individuals concerned with the amoral issue of convincing their audience that commonly accepted values are realised rather than the moral issue of realising those values. As for China, it is well recognised that the pervasiveness of corruption is closely related to a series of informal institutions based upon highly individualised personal networks. I hypothesise that these corruption-inclusive informal institutions are constantly reinforced because they are effective in totalising the multiple roles of the cadres of the Communist Party of China (CPC). With critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the methodological approach and based on the empirical data collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation during my eight-months fieldwork in China, this study demonstrates the empirical argument by identifying the structure of informal institutions and demonstrating how they serve the expression of different idealised values.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Dissertation zielt darauf ab, ein empirisches Rätsel zu lösen, das Korruption – wo immer allgegenwärtig und routiniert – aufgibt: Warum ist Korruption „unvermeidlich“ ? Aufbauend auf meinen Nachforschungen zum Fall China gehe ich davon aus, dass, erstens, mit einem lediglich rechtlichen Begriff von Korruption wenig Erkenntnis gewonnen ist, und zweitens, Korruption als erwartete Handlung, die über die individuelle Entscheidung hinausgeht, eine Reihe von unvermeidlichen korruptionsisomorphen informellen Institutionen inkludiert. Der entscheidende Punkt, warum Menschen bewusst formelle Institutionen brechen oder umgehen und an korrupten Praktiken teilnehmen, besteht daher darin, zu erklären, warum bestimmte informelle Verhaltensmuster, die derselben operativen Logik folgen wie Korruption, ständig verstärkt werden, während formal kodierte Regeln nur nominell erscheinen. Hinter dem empirischen Rätsel der unvermeidlichen Korruption steckt letztlich die theoretische Frage, was die Wirksamkeit einer Institution ausmacht. Diese Untersuchung entwickelt einen alternativen Rahmen, der erlaubt die Analyse des individuellen Entscheidungsprozesses mit dem großen sozialen Situationskontext zu verknüpfen. Zur Beantwortung der Frage nach der Unvermeidlichkeit von Korruption schlage ich eine These vor, die auf Mannheims relativistischer Denkweise, Polanyis Vorstellung von der stillschweigenden Dimension des Wissens und dem dramaturgischen Ansatz von Goffman in Bezug auf soziale Interaktion basiert. Genauer gesagt, die Stärkung gewisser informeller Institutionen, die Korruption einschließen, ist auf die Einhaltung impliziter Rationalität zurückzuführen. Meiner These folgt einer rationalitätsorientierten Argumentation, die letztendlich das menschliche Handeln dominiert und das reibungslose Funktionieren der kooperativen Interaktion innerhalb der Gesellschaft unterstützt. Im Besonderen ist das, was eine Institution rechtfertigt oder rationalisiert, kein rechtliches oder moralisches Kriterium, sondern die von ihr vermittelte Bedeutung. In Bezug auf Goffman sind alle sozialen Subjekte Darsteller - „Händler der Moral“ - und Institutionen können als Ausdrucksmittel betrachtet werden, deren Wirksamkeit darin besteht, idealisierte Werte auszudrücken, die die Rollen der Darsteller anstelle ihrer technischen oder logischen Perfektion beanspruchen. Mit anderen Worten, es gibt keine absolute Richtigkeit oder Wahrheit. Der Einzelne beschäftigt sich mit der amoralischen Frage, das Publikum davon zu überzeugen, dass allgemein akzeptierte Werte verwirklicht werden, und nicht mit der moralischen Frage der Verwirklichung dieser Werte. Im Hinblick auf China wird allgemein angenommen, dass die Auswucherung von

Korruption eng mit einer Reihe informeller Institutionen zusammenhängt, die in stark individualisierten persönlichen Netzwerken errichtet wurden. Ich gehe davon aus, dass diese informellen Institutionen, die Korruption einschließen, ständig verstärkt werden, weil sie die vielfältigen Aufgaben der Kader der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas effektiv zusammenfassen. Mit Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) als methodischem Ansatz identifiziert und demonstriert diese Studie die Logik und Struktur informeller Institutionen, und wie sie dazu dienen, verschiedene idealisierte Werte auszudrücken. Die empirischen Daten dieser Forschung wurden hauptsächlich durch halbstrukturierte Interviews und Teilnehmerbeobachtung während meiner acht-monatigen Feldforschungsarbeit in China gewonnen.

Preface

An empirical puzzle: Why does corruption appear to be “unavoidable”?

Focusing the scope of analysis on China and paying special attention to transactional forms of corruption, this dissertation attempts to solve an empirical puzzle: Why does corruption appear to be “unavoidable”? By “unavoidable” I do not imply that all anti-corruption effort is in vain because corruption is rooted in selfishness as part of human nature. Instead, being unavoidable means that corruption is no longer the exception to the rule, but is the rule (Persson et al. 2013, 449). To be more exact, some informal patterns of behaviour bearing similar forms of logic and structure as corruption become the rule. Some scholars have defined this scenario as systemic corruption or endemic corruption.¹ With China as an apropos case, this empirical puzzle does not exclusively effect China but also many other places where corruption appears to be normalised. The most typical feature of such a scenario of corruption is that people take the initiative to participate in corrupt practices but at the same time morally condemn them. During my fieldwork, on numerous occasions I observed people complaining of suffering extortion by public officials and meanwhile taking “backdoor” initiatives to get things done. Likewise, public officials give speeches about anti-corruption, but still keep taking advantage of their position. People subsequently rationalised what they did by asserting that “‘society’ is like this, there is no need to be so conscientious,” and “if we can’t change the rules, then we better comply.” In other words, they feel emotionally exhausted by corruption and meanwhile deem it a necessary tool in daily practice. But why does corruption seem to be “unavoidable”? In what sense exactly does it serve to fulfil routine practice? Why would people consciously take part in practices that violate formal rules and deem them to be necessary? Are existing approaches applicable to answering these questions?

¹ For further studies see Smith’s description of contradictions in Nigeria (Smith in Heywood 2014) and Raghunathan’s (2010) work discussing paradoxes and dilemmas about corruption, etc. Concerning systemic corruption, a distinction needs to be made from the very similar term “systematic corruption”. Systematic corruption is sometimes identified as interchangeable with political corruption. This refers to one type of corrupt behavior, namely by politicians who use decision-making powers to manipulate the law system in order to pursue personal or group interests, or secure their political regime. But systemic corruption does not refer to any specific type of corruption, but rather a situation or scenario of corruption, usually when corruption is pervasive and deemed by people as “normal” action.

Is there any principle of social functioning remained unrevealed, which is reflected by such scenario? With these concerns in mind, I went into the field to attempt to find out what leads to the routinisation of corruption.

An impressive finding during the field research: The sense of telling right from wrong

From October to November of 2016, I visited several cities in Liaoning Province and talked with people there about the ruling party, social values and corruption. In 2016 November, I participated in a conference held in Hangzhou and on the way back went to Hefei, had a chance to talk with some cadres from these two cities. During December 2016 to January 2017, my fieldwork was carried out mainly in Chongqing. After coming back from Chongqing, I spent another three months revisiting some interviewees in the Central Liaoning Area. My major target group was middle-grass level cadres from various sectors of the CPC and local government, with ordinary people from all walks of life included as well. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I also took part in a range of activities such as a cadre educating class and casual get-togethers of government officials, trying to observe their life in a less obtrusive way.

The most striking finding from my eight months' fieldwork in China is the fact that everytime I asked about how they made decisions or what was the fundamental principle that guides their daily practice, almost all cadres – either from the Central Liaoning city group or from Chongqing, or several other places I visited – implied that they followed a “sense” of telling right from wrong rather than a formally-coded set of rules as their working guidance. Such a sense could only be felt but not expressed in words. Neither could people simply learn it from cadre education classes. Instead, it was deemed to be a form of knowledge that could be gained only through constant conducting. As an interviewee told me:

“We used to ignore textual rules... especially before this on-going anti-corruption effort started... we follow a sense to tell right and wrong. Actually, I still feel nervous and unsure (*xinli fahuang*) if I do everything according to the (formally-coded) rules because they are rigid and lifeless. We should make decisions according to ‘case by case’ basis.”

This finding reminded me of an investigative report written by Li Kejun – a retired county party secretary – about the administrative strategies of the local cadres. In his book, Li (2015) indicated that the most crucial rule dominating the county level cadres' behaviour was that “there is no fixed rule” (*xingwu dingze*). Echoing my own observation, there seemed to be a

more general principle underlying this very flexible but definitely not entirely chaotic working style. It is also this invisible rule that sustains the routine functioning of the local administrative system as well as the emergence and reinforcement of a series of informal patterns of behaving which do not exclude corruption. Therefore, I realised that the crux of disentangling the puzzle about “unavoidable” corruption would probably lie in illuminating “the rule behind ‘no fixed rule.’” The answer to this inquiry might also shed light on the operation of this general principle within human society.

Conceptualising the “sense” behind “no fixed rule”: Tacit rationality

Inspired by Mannheim’s relational view about human intellectual activity and Polanyi’s idea about tacit knowledge, I propose to conceptualise what the cadres referred to as the “sense” of telling right from wrong as “tacit rationality.” Based on the analysis of empirical data, I develop the idea that human action is ultimately dominated by tacit rationality orienting towards sustaining the smooth operation of cooperative interaction and finally a functioning order of the social system. This goal is achieved through a process of rationalising instead of optimising, and the realisation of rationalisation entails the invoking of common social values. On this basis, I further introduce Goffman’s dramaturgical view into my theoretical frame. By defining an institution as expressive equipment that is repeatedly employed by performers to convey certain common recognised values, I propose that the effectiveness of an institution lies in its capacity to express idealised values claimed by the subject’s social status.

Especially when a situation is simultaneously defined by multiple views, namely when the social subject ought to play multiple roles, then the effectiveness of an institution rests on whether it can help to convey all the idealised values claimed by these roles.

As for China, I argue that corruption-inclusive informal institutions dominate people’s actions because they are in accordance with tacit rationality – the fundamental rule underlying the “no fixed rule.” Specifically, there is a tension that exists between cadres’ political, social and economic roles. Formally-coded institutions are only designed to address orthodox political values while they lack the capacity to convey the idealised values claimed by cadres’ social and economic roles. Therefore, the cadres have developed a complex of informal expressive equipment and these informal patterns in turn shape people’s minds and reality by being repeatedly invoked.

Contribution of the research

By expounding on the mechanism that underpins the routinisation of corruption by proposing a thesis of tacit rationality, this dissertation attempts to address one of the most challenging tasks facing corruption researchers (Teorell 2007, 3), that is, “to understand the conceptual and theoretical links between corruption and the functioning of a society’s economic and political institutions” (Jain 2001, 72). Specifically, this research contributes to the literature of corruption study from three aspects.

Firstly, emanating from a relational instead of a relative view of rationality, this study switches the focus of analysis from the institutional structures facilitating corruption to the mechanism rationalising corruption. I contend that the routinisation of corruption is a problem of rationalisation instead of optimisation. Current corruption studies tend to mix two different questions: what successfully realises corrupt practices, and why would people participate in corruption. The answer to the former does not explain the latter, as possibility does not count for inevitability. Based on the fundamental idea that subjective rationality endorses the validity of objective rationality, this study provides an alternative explanatory frame for the inevitability of corruption, maintaining that corrupt practice bears a similar logic and operative structure to a complex of informal institutions. As expressive equipment repeatedly invoked by people in their daily performance, informal patterns of behaviour including corruption are endorsed by their symbolic meaning rather than any specific set of legal or moral rules. This meaning then constitutes the foundation of mutual understanding and cooperative interaction. To conclude, the source of legitimacy as well as the force promoting the constant reinforcement of informal institutions is also the mechanism that rationalises corruption. Corruption might violate formally-coded law, but under certain circumstances, it accords with the tacit rationality, namely the society’s inherent demand for cooperation and order.

Secondly, referring to Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to human action, this research is grounded in a dynamic view of the structure of human motivation instead of a static one. I presume that a social subject adjusts preferences according to the concrete context. In other words, I intend to look at the “subject in context” rather than “subject and context.” Most classical corruption studies build on an assumption of the firm identity of the public officials and thus separate human agency from context, which leads to the difficulty in explaining why

formal institutions do not function well while certain informal patterns of behaving are constantly being reinforced. By highlighting the fact that individuals play multiple roles defined by different social relations simultaneously in daily conduct, this research addresses the selective mechanism determining the effectiveness of institutions. Taking into consideration situational factors links individual agency to a subjective status developed from a larger social structure.

Thirdly, with a specific concern for the cooperative attribute of social action, I raise a counter-intuitive hypothesis that the routinisation of corruption is rooted in society's inherent demand for order. Traditional functionalist thought concentrates on the economic aspect of the function of corruption, viewing it as the "oil that greases the wheel," while I suggest that the crux of disentangling the puzzle concerning unavoidable corruption consists not in whether it really reduces costs but in why people choose informal ways including corruption over formal ones to realise their goals. Adopting an instrumental view towards institutions, I argue that the mechanism sustaining the cooperative interaction among social members also the force that pushes people to choose informal institutions and participate in corrupt exchange networks. In other words, the "function" of corruption could also be conceived of in terms of how it serves to maintain the "wheel" of social interaction.

Structure of the dissertation

The main body of this dissertation consists of six parts. The introductory chapter firstly highlights the research topic and my fundamental hypothesis. After that, I illuminate the theoretical inquiry behind the empirical puzzle and the emergence of my explanatory framework based on a literature review. The last section of the introduction demonstrates its research significance through a further elaboration of the argument. Chapter one concerns the theoretical and methodological frame. It elucidates the key constituent concepts of my theoretical apparatus: the concepts of tacit rationality, totalising, and the expressive capacity of an institution as the source of its effectiveness. I then briefly explain how tacit rationality can be applied to understand the reinforcement of informal institutions as well as corruption in China. The third part of chapter one introduces in detail how CDA – the methodological approach – supports my analysis, as well as the scope of the target group, the time frame of my research, sources and methods of data collecting, and why I chose the Central Liaoning

city group and Chongqing municipality as the locations for fieldwork. Chapter two analyses the roles and the respective idealised values claimed by the unique social status of CPC cadres. Based on chapter two, chapter three further identifies the corruption-inclusive informal institutions and focuses on illuminating how they serve to totalise the cadres' different roles by conveying commonly accepted values, namely the source of their effectiveness. In chapter four, I present a live example of the establishment of a potential corrupt exchange network based on my personal experience of participating in constructive drinking. By doing this, I attempt to demonstrate how informal institutions function in concrete social practice and tacitly make people accept transactional corruption as part of an obligation. The concluding chapter proposes a reconceptualisation of corruption, summarises the main arguments and discusses the limitations of this research.

Note about Chinese transcription and translation

This dissertation adopts *hanyu pinyin* for the transcription of Chinese terms and names. As for the English translation of the most important and commonly used Chinese political terms and phrases, I refer to the official version of the translation published on the websites of the Central Compilation & Translation Bureau and China Academy of Translation.

Note about the level of cadres

The Chinese administrative rank system is rather complicated.² Generally, government officials are ranked into five administrative levels, and each level contains a further two sub-levels. This 10-level institution constitutes the basic means of reference for identifying a cadre's rank. Parallel with the major ranking system there are also some special systems depending on the nature of the duty of certain departments or the level of the administrative

² Many studies have tried to address this topic. One of the most authoritative and clear interpretations is offered by Nie Huihua (Deputy Dean of National Academy of Development and Strategy, Renmin University) and Gu Yan (Associated Research Fellow of Institute for Social Development, National Development and Reform Commission) in their jointly published article "How to understand the administrative level of cadres" (如何看懂党政干部的行政级别) http://www.sohu.com/a/119403813_207224.

region. Moreover, a cadre's level as well as the importance of his or her position within the CPC and the government also mutually influence each other. In this research, for a neater understanding, when necessary, I will refer to the general rank without describing the subtle nature of each position, indicating a cadre's level by using the number from 1-10 together with the concrete title of his or her administrative office – for example, magistrate of X County (level 7).

Acknowledgements

This dissertation took shape during my four-year course of studies at Duisburg-Essen University as a Doctoral Research Fellow of the Research Training Group “Risk and East Asia.” The journey of writing about corruption as such a challenging topic was not plain. The most important thing that I have learnt from the past several years' training is that the best solution to the obstacles on the path of academic exploration is to be persistent and stay focused. The eight month's intensive fieldwork is of special value for me. Making contact with people from all walks of life helped me cultivate sensitivity, adaptability, as well as a sharper capacity for observation. Such experience also allowed me to test my theoretical knowledge in real life, and in turn, to modify my thoughts. The successful completion of my dissertation is owed to many people who have offered me their generous support.

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my questions, even those borne of my ignorance and lack of experience. Without their support, I could not have had such a fruitful experience of fieldwork.

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Abbreviations

PRC	People's Republic of China
CPC	Communist Party of China
NPC	National People's Congress
NCPCC	National Congress of the Communist Party of China
CDIC	Central Discipline Inspection Commission
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
TI	Transparency International
DLP	The Developmental Leadership Program
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Topic and Hypothesis

Corruption refers to the misuse of entrusted public power for private gain. This phenomenon concerns governments all over the world and has been extensively studied by scholars. Developed on the assumption of the need for an exclusive emphasis on the self-serving attributes of human nature, most studies adopt political-economic perspectives and focus on the structural conditions that facilitate corruption. Meanwhile, much less effort has been made to explore other facets related to motivational mechanisms. This dissertation aims to fill this gap. Though focusing my scope of analysis on China, I attempt to provide an alternative explanatory framework for the empirical puzzle that confronts not just China but many other societies – especially some in developing countries – where corruption is pervasive and routinised. That puzzle revolves around the question: Why does corruption appear to be “unavoidable”? To be specific, I question why people consciously choose not to report but take the initiative to participate in corrupt practices, despite the existence of an official institutional framework that is established to punish corruption as well as to provide formal channels to facilitate getting routine things done, and despite the fact that those involved themselves condemn corruption on moral grounds (Persson et al. 2013, 458)? With special attention on transactional forms of official corruption³ - mainly bribery and nepotism – and taking a sociological view, I argue that, as corruption becomes an unavoidable action “that is beyond individual control and motivation” (Granovetter 1985), “unavoidable” does not signify legally-identified corruption per se, but a series of informal institutions which inherently entail or “trigger” corrupt exchange, as these informal patterns of behaviour bear a similar logic and operative structure to corrupt practices. I suggest that the reinforcement of these informal patterns of behaviour should be understood within the concrete social context in terms of a tacit rationality-oriented reasoning which ultimately dominates human action. In short, the mechanisms that sustain the smooth operation of cooperative interaction within society also indirectly “force” people to take part in corrupt exchanges. When corruption becomes unavoidable, it implies that attaining any interests or goals – not only illicit but also licit ones – must somehow be based on certain informal procedures which do not exclude

³ Corrupt exchange with entrusted public power as the object.

corruption. The routinisation of corruption then must be conceived as a “by-product” of such informal institutions that “actually dominate courses of action” (Lü 2000, 27) rather than existing as isolated phenomena.

Therefore, the crux of disentangling our puzzle about why people consciously break or bypass formal institutions and participate in corrupt practices lies in neither which “wrong” values motivate corruption nor which structural conditions facilitate corruption, but the competition between formal and informal institutions. Specifically, by inquiring into why corruption appears to be unavoidable, we are asking why certain informal patterns of behaviour that do not exclude corruption are consolidated and reinforced while formally-coded rules appear to be merely nominal. In other words, what needs to be explained is why certain informal institutions in daily practice seem more effective or attractive than formally prescribed ones, and ultimately what determines the effectiveness of an institution, and whether there are any invisible rules determining the functioning of the society that dominate people’s behaviour. This inquiry entails a frame that links the analysis of how individuals manage their decision-making to the larger social situational context. However, dominated by the principal-agent model and social-cultural paradigms, most existing research looks at corruption as given either through the subject or context and tends to overlook the subject in context. As Ashforth et al. (2008) indicate, current explanations attribute corruption to either “bad apples” or “bad barriers.” Specifically, they concentrate on either the limited ethical cognition of subjects or structural conditions that make corrupt practices successful. Neither perspective fully explains our puzzle, for the former neglects the conscious elements motivating corrupt practices and the latter cannot explain why the guarding principal is compromised.

To address the question, I propose a thesis built on Mannheim’s relationist view of thinking, Polanyi’s idea about the tacit dimension of knowing, and Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to social interaction. I argue that human action is ultimately dominated by a tacit rationality with the goal of sustaining the smooth operation of cooperative interaction and thereby a functioning order of the social system. This deep rationality gives a sense to explicit goals and ultimately determines how people make decisions about when to apply which set of criterions of behaviour as well as how to reconcile different goals. Accordingly, the effectiveness of an institution does not lie in logical perfection for its own sake but comes from its compliance with tacit rationality. Specifically, people act within the fabric of social relations and the inherent demand for cooperation – commitment among social members – tacitly directs the

social subjects' decision-making towards rationalising instead of optimising. Or we could say that optimising must be based on rationalising. All our explicit goals, be they utilitarian or value-oriented, are valid only when they appear to be reasonable to others – to our audience, or at least to the most relevant others. Guided by this principle, when confronting a new situation, social subjects do not look for optimal solutions, but for a good solution in the sense of being justifiable or workable. Especially when we are required to play multiple roles in front of the same audience. This is to say, taking a social subject as a performer, a rational performer aims to make sure that all the shared values claimed by different roles are expressed simultaneously instead of sticking to a utility-maximising scheme or certain morally or legally “correct” value. Therefore, as institutionalised expressive equipment, an institution attains effectiveness and is thereby reinforced through its compatibility with conveying multiple values. In short, an effective institution may help people to express value a and b instead of forcing people to choose between a and b.

Accordingly, I hypothesise that behind the routinisation of corruption lies a contextual-related social cognition of impartiality rather than uncontrolled self-seeking. The answer to the puzzle about “unavoidable” corruption lies thus not in how “institutional structures [...] produce incentives for payoffs and self-dealing” (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016, 10) in a setting where “individuals are assumed to do the best they can” (Rose-Ackerman 1978, 5), but in how people apply the criterion of “the best.” Based on this notion, corruption in the sense of formal rule violation finds its rightness in reason and nature (Douglas 1986), as a self-evident given: “This is how the world functions,”⁴ as opposed to a pure cost-benefit calculation aimed at maximising individual utility. The justification of corruption-inclusive institutions can be attributed to tacit rationality. Superficially, these informal behaviour patterns become reinforced because they are more valid in helping people achieve interests. But in essence, they dominate people’s behaviour because they present a higher level of

⁴ Mary Douglas indicated in her book “How institutions think” that people think through institutions, and the entrenching of an institution is a cognitive process as well as it is social. At the very beginning, institutions are only conventions and can be abolished or changed anytime. They can be finally justified and stabilized only through “analogy,” which is to say, they must find their roots in nature and rationalise the value behind them as the natural law. For example, the rationalizing of the division of labour between women and men in society is entrenched by making the analogy that “women to men is just like left to right,” therefore the difference between them becomes part of natural law, part of a common knowledge that people never doubt or are even consciously aware of.

totalising compatibility than formal institutions in reconciling different views to fulfil the inherent demand of society for order. This also constitutes the fundamental explanation of their higher level of validity than that of formal institutions in achieving goals. As for China, it is well established that the pervasiveness of corruption is closely related to a series of informal institutions based on highly individualised personal networks (*Guanxi*). But the question of why these informal patterns of behaviour are constantly reinforced and dominate people's daily practices remains insufficiently explained due to theoretical and methodological restraints.

Conceiving the theoretical frame, I adopt Fairclough's three-stage CDA as the general methodological structure and Machin and Mayr's (2012) toolkit of applying CDA as the concrete techniques of my analysis. Unlike many corruption studies that delve into the facts about its level, causes or consequences and often refer to quantitative methods, I shall look at another form of social reality – discourse, and make the object of analysis how informal institutions serve to convey certain commonly accepted idealised values. As Weedon states (1987, 108), discourse refers to “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. [...] They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern.” Put simply, “discourse [...] is not just language,” it is “a relational view of language” (Fairclough 2015, 55–56).

Thereby, CDA provides a capable tool for interpreting thoughts. “Being critical” means not only analysing the ideas conveyed through discourse but also questioning why – under what condition, for what reason and to whom – the subjects created the discourse, which makes CDA intrinsically related to my theoretical inquiry. Paying special attention to county-level cadres⁵ and their daily performance, I intend to illuminate how corruption-inclusive informal

⁵ They not only constitute the overwhelming majority of CPC cadre groups which also means being the main participants of corrupt practices, but also bear the role as a “bridge” between the state and the people, as Xi Jinping described them: “the key few (*guanjian shaoshu* 关键少数)”. Moreover, they are one level of authority on the one hand, and participants of economic activities as well as members of families and groups on the other hand. These subject-positions are respectively dominated by state advocated communist values, market-oriented criterions and traditional ethics.

institutions help cadres to express the common values claimed by their roles endowed by the unique political institution of China.

CDA thus supports my analysis in two ways: at the stage of fieldwork and data coding, it helps me identify interesting patterns and formulate my hypothesis; when it comes to further analysis, I adopt CDA both to explain how certain informal institutions convey common values and to detect further evidence to support my hypothesis. With the help of CDA, I intend to discover the prevailing values hidden behind corruption-relevant discourse and use them as the foundation of further analysis. Most of my data was collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation during eight months of fieldwork in China. Additionally, official documents published by the government and party organs, speeches given by the leadership, and propaganda films are also important sources of my data.

Theories of Corruption in View of the Hypothesis

Raising the Question: Limitations of the Principal-agent Model and Social-Cultural Approach

The principal-agent model

The general state of the art: For the past decades, anti-corruption has been at the top of the agenda of many countries all over the world. Multifarious policies have been implemented. However, the outcome remains unsatisfactory, as summarised by one report jointly published by the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) and the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, which states that “despite significant investment in anti-corruption work [...] corrupt countries are considered to be just as corrupt now as they were before the anti-corruption interventions” (Marquette and Peiffer 2015a). Moreover, it turns out that many countries with a high rate of corruption tend to enact just as many anti-corruption institutions as those ranked by the TI as less corrupt.⁶ The unsatisfactory outcome of anti-corruption efforts leads to the question about the validity of the principal-agent model. Represented by the works of Nye (1967), Rose-Ackeraman (1978), Rothstein (2008), the principal-agent model is the classic political-economic frame for corruption studies as well as the most commonly-applied theoretical base of anti-corruption policymaking. Founding itself within the rational choice

⁶ Relevant studies see Doig et al. (2007) (2005), Heeks (2011), Persson, Rothstein and Teorell (2013), Zapata (2018), Dupuy and Neset (2018), Mungiu-Pippidi (2015), Fukuyama (2014), Hough (2017), Tong (2014), Collier (2002), and Jain (2001), etc.

frame whereby every choice is an outcome of a cost-benefit calculation, the principal-agent model concerns legitimate owner-agent relationships⁷ and presumes that public officials – agents delegated discretionary power of the state or the people – are inherently inclined to betray the trust of either their superiors or the public in order to maximise their personal gain (Rose-Ackerman 1978). It thus looks at the “quality” of the formal institutional system by regarding corruption as a crime of calculation that is deeply rooted in uncontrolled self-seeking, a view that makes a “normative judgment [...] between ‘better’ and ‘worse’ institutions” (Vannucci 2017, 1). Proponents attribute the pervasiveness of corruption to technical imperfections of or problematic values underlying the formal system, advocating the idea of curbing corruption by improving supervising institutions in order to ensure the transparency and symmetry of information so that the principals can “monitor the agents’ performance in a more effective way” (Menocal et al. 2015, 15).

However, what if everyone – including those who are supposed to be the monitoring principal – is corrupt? What if the institutional complex is well designed but not respected? Why does an institution work well in one place and lose validity in another? As Johnston (1998, 85–86) indicated, institutional reform needs a “social foundation,” and is valid only in the countries where “systems of accountability [...] and the rule of law are credible,” namely when a formal institutional complex enjoys a dominant role in regulating social members’ behaviour. In places where corruption is pervasive and routinised, however, weak moral control and ineffective implementation of formal laws mutually reinforce each other and jointly lead to a reverse outcome. To emphasise the point, the *raison d’être* of the existence of formal institutions – not only relevant anti-corruption institutions but the whole complex of formal institutions – is just to be there to be bypassed or ignored. Confronting the fact that the principals can be compromised or even “missing” (Schwertheim 2017, 4), the principal-agent model becomes less persuasive, as it pays exclusive attention to the agents and presumes the existence of a benevolent principal (Aidt 2003). When reflecting on the disadvantage of the principal-agent model, some scholars propose that viewing systemic corruption as a principal-

⁷ Persson et al (2013, 452) has distinguished two types of principal-agent models “depending on the perspective about who is the agent and who is the principal.” In the classical treatment – bureaucratic corruption – rulers are the principal and the bureaucracy the agent. Representative researches see Becker and Stigler (1974), Van Rijkeghem, and Weder (2001), etc.. “In line with the less classical perspective [...] it is not primarily the bureaucrats who need to be controlled, but the ruling elite. In this model – political corruption – rulers are hence modeled as agents and citizens as principals.” See Adsera (2003), Besley and Prat (2006), and Myerson (1993), and etc.

agent problem completely mischaracterises this phenomenon. Instead, they suggest a collective action perspective (Persson et al. 2013). The most important contribution of the collective action approach is to indicate that corruption is something not only involving agents but also principals. Drawing on Olson and Ostrom's theory about collective action and "synthesizing insights about [...] game theory, and historical institutionalism" (Rothstein 2011, 4), this approach conceives corruption as a free-rider problem or a prisoner dilemma motivated by "the changing levels of trust in society" (Marquette and Peiffer 2015, 3). Advocators assert that people participate in corrupt practices because they expect that others will do so. Out of rational calculation, everyone expects the other social members to go first in making an effort to create a "corruption-free environment" (Marquette and Peiffer 2015b) so that they can enjoy it without actually sacrificing any short-term personal utility. As Persson et al. (2013) analysed, when everyone has a negative expectation of the other people, "the costs of acting fairly" is high while "the benefits of acting corruptly" remain attractive. In short, no one wants to be a naive utopian sacrificing something for an abstract goal, and this is the primary account given for the persistence of corruption and the low efficacy of anti-corruption institutions. Accordingly, some scholars recommend a "big bang" solution (Rothstein 2011). However, by tacitly assuming the ineffectiveness of the current institutional settings in creating the cooperative initiate as a premise or research background, the collective action approach tends to underestimate the investment of current effort and leaves the why question unexplained. To conclude, it still addresses only half of the puzzle by furthering the understanding of why people keep taking part in corrupt practices but without expounding on how corruption get routinised in the first place, neither why the current institutional arrangement fails to stop this situation. In this sense, collective action is a complement to the general principal-agent approach (Marquette and Peiffer 2015a, 1).

The social-cultural approach

The general state of the art: Regarding the disadvantage the political-economic paradigm – not being able to explain the ineffectiveness of formal constraints, another notable stream of literature – the social-cultural approach – offers a complementary approach. If the traditional political-economic institutional paradigm approaches corruption by concentrating on the law itself, then the social-cultural paradigm concerns people's law consciousness by looking at "interiorized values which shape individuals' moral preferences" (Vannucci 2017, 4), which is also expressed by some scholars as the "intrinsic motivation" (Barr and Serra 2010). As

Elster (1989, 158) states, “[a]lthough it is hard to prove, I believe that a variation in corruption across countries is explained largely by the degree of public-spiritedness of their officials, not by the cleverness of the institutional design.” In short, this line of thinking examines the environment within which formal institutions are implemented. Early on, academics tended to attribute the ineffectiveness of formal constraints as well as the reinforcement of informal institutions to the influence of culture which is internalised deeply in people’s mental and psychological structures. Based on descriptive materials collected from anthropological observation²³ and the idea that the “deep-rooted diffusion of [...] informal norms endorsing illicit behaviour [...] will undermine any intensification of repression and law enforcement” (Vannucci 2017, 259 273), this thought implies “a predisposition for a group of people to behave in corrupt ways” (Klitgaard 2017, 1). At the centre of this perspective lies the lack of law consciousness or awareness, which accounts for the ineffectiveness of the formal system in the conflict between state-prescribed values “aiming at fairness and impartiality” and “deep-interiorized in-group favouritism” (Laver 2014, 30).

As with the traditional political-economic paradigm, the limitation of the early social-cultural thinking also derives from its neglect of the conscious constituent of subjectivity. This line of thinking fell into the large political-economic institutional frame, as it simply introduced a traditional-psychological variant into the equation without bringing about much substantial change to the general explanatory frame. This approach portrays social subjects as “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel 1967, 68) who unconsciously follow traditions without thinking much,²⁴ while culturally dominant values are only seen as variables that may create moral costs. By explaining pervasive corruption as a result of unconscious obedience to certain values, early social-cultural thought emphasises the influence of intrinsic “traits” of a certain cultural group and assigns “too much unwarranted explanatory power to the value system as an independent variable,” while neglects the instrumental motivation behind social subjects’ decision-making. Thus, “when one considers endemic values [themselves] as an underlying cause for problems,

²³ See also Easterly and Levine’s (1997) research on the relationship between ethnic fragmentation and the low efficiency of policy implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa, Stulhofer et al.’s (2008) work about corruption in Croatia, and Goldstein and Drybread’s study on corruption in Latin America.

²⁴ By “cultural dope,” Garfinkel refers to “the main-in-the-sociologist’s society who produces the stable features of society by acting in compliance with reestablished and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides” (Garfinkel 1967, 68).

the account might convey cultural essentialism” (Hizi 2014, 68). Moreover, it “fall[s] short of asking the more fundamental questions of how and why (certain informal institutions and) values have survived changes in society” (Lü 2000, 17-20), as well as how exactly they serve the functioning of society. When corruption appears to be unavoidable, it does not indicate a situation where all social members are unaware of the illegality of their practices because certain culturally-dominated values cloud their cognition. On the contrary, people are consciously aware that corruption is illegal,²⁵ yet, they are somehow trapped in a “loop” and finally end up with no other option but to take part in the “game” with a cynical attitude. People seek illicit ways of getting things done because they neither believe that public officials will perform their duty impartially, nor do they conceive of other social members as law-compliers. Referring to Sardan’s (1999) statement in his research about corruption in Africa, “corruption is therefore as frequently denounced in words as it is practised in fact.”

With the growing number of studies of actual individual cases of corruption as well as reflections on early approaches, researchers adopting a social-cultural perspective are paying more and more attention to the contextual meaning embodied in corrupt practices as well as the subjective motivation behind individuals’ decision-making. They tend not to take dominant moralities as fixed and preassume that variety is just there to influence the calculation of utility, and go deeper into exploring the content and immanent logic of value-oriented actions. Rather than the correlative relationship, scholars show more interest in investigating the causal relationship between social values and corruption. To do this, general social theories are introduced to explain corruption. For instance, Graaf (2007; 2010) has proposed using Pierre Bourdieu’s social action theory to examine corruption cases. By referring to the concepts of habitus, mental schemata and disposition, he argues that “[a] specific trigger in the presence of certain dispositions will lead to corrupt behavior [...]. Whether an official becomes corrupt depends on his or her disposition to become corrupt” (G. D. Graaf 2007, 72). Though without going deeper into much concrete analysis, Graaf’s idea highlights the determinant influence of human agency on totalising different levels of external expectations and constraints. Another commonly used systematic frame is the social exchange

²⁵ As Heywood indicates, in light of profound changes taking place all over the world, “people are embracing new expectations about accountability associated with a modern bureaucratic state even as they lament and struggle to slow the demise of forms of sociality and accountability linked to kinship and patron-clientism. The contradictions of corruption both mirror and explain people’s growing expectations of and frustrated aspirations for democracy and development” (Heywood 2014, 56).

theory. Referring to works by scholars such as Simmel, Durkheim, Mauss, and Hirschman, this stream of studies build upon a basic idea that “social life entails interdependence between individuals, frequently manifest in exchange” (Barbalet 2018). Most advocators of this approach adopt anthropological methods. They suggest conceptualising corruption as a form of reciprocal tie based on interaction (Torsello 2015, 3), and devote effort in describing how emotion, culture and the exchange of goods together motivate the consolidation and justification of corrupt ties.

Despite the difference in points of focus and disciplinary angles, there are several grounds of consensus among researchers who adopt general social theories to understand corruption. Firstly, to better understand the motives rather than relevant factors of corruption, more contextual analysis based on first-hand material of individual corruption cases is needed (G. D. Graaf 2007, 41). Secondly, analysis should switch from the macro-level to a micro one for, as Kwong (1997, 110) suggests, we need “to break it [corruption] down into its basic units and understand how it operates at the individual level [...]. Corruption, while a social phenomenon and a public issue, is ultimately several interacting but discreet purposive social acts.” The third consensus is that the logic behind how people invoke different moralities or values and corresponding expectations is as important as the substantial meanings denoted by these moral and value standards. Such logic might be in accordance with the general base upon which society is possible. Lastly, except for constituting a probable complementary to the disadvantaged formal political-economic system, corruption might also play another role in the social functioning process, which up to now remains unrevealed to us.

Studies of the relationship between *Guanxi* and corruption in China: The social-cultural approach is widely applied to investigating corruption in developing countries among which China – as a typical relationship-centred society – is often seen as exemplary. China provides a perfect arena for observing the interactional attributes of corrupt transactions. The current cutting-edge issue guiding the discussion in this realm concerns the “fuzzy boundaries between gift-giving and bribery” (Tong 2014, 11), where the crux of disentangling the puzzle of unavoidable corruption lies.²⁶ Basically, *Guanxi* is a Chinese term variously translated as social relations, personal connections, or particularistic ties (Kipnis 1996). Smart (1993) has

²⁶ For the most representative general studies of *Guanxi* in Chinese society, see Mayfair Yang (1989; 1994), Yunxiang Yan (1996), Greenblatt et al. (1982), Gold et al. (2002), Andrew Walder (1986), Jean Oi (1989), Andrew Kipnis (1997), Yanjie Bian (2013; 2018), and Dong (2012).

pertinently illustrated its nature as “occupying the middle of the space of social relationship, ranging from purely instrumental to purely affective,” whereby it “combines instrumental utility with respect for maintaining and enhancing a relationship, and avoids the polar ends of conformity to impersonal rule systems or blatant extraction of tribute.” As Gold (2002) indicated, critics see the negative side of *Guanxi* as fueling the trend of rampant corruption and as an obstacle to China’s path towards the rule of law, while those with a positive view towards *Guanxi* take it as adding humanity to cold transactions and as a remedy to the absence of rigid rules. In fact, *Guanxi* functions in both ways simultaneously. However, it is never made clear in what sense exactly a practise can be defined as “reasonable” *Guanxi* practice or as corrupt.

Concerning the overlapping character of *Guanxi* and corruption, a growing number of scholars have noted that the crux of disentangling the puzzle about “unavoidable” corruption lies in identifying the operative mechanism that both sustains personal ties and at the same time rationalises corrupt exchanges. Many of them attempt to offer an explicit theoretical conceptualisation of the skilful performance involved in the operative process that justifies corruption. For instance, Smart and Hsu conceptualise this performance as “tact.”²⁷ They argue that reliance on *Guanxi* to get things done is not a straightforward, automatically strategy, neither is it directed solely by a pure cost-benefit calculation. Rather, it has more to do with the maintenance of a long-term, stable social relationship. “[C]ultivating *Guanxi* is not just the usage of customary forms to disguise what might otherwise be recognized as corrupt exchange. Instead, the exchanges are used to cultivate and strengthen relationships that are expected to continue” (Smart and Hsu 2013).²⁸

For a further understanding of the realisation of tact, Smart and Hsu have referred to Goffman’s idea about face-keeping and politeness. And Yan Xu et al. (2018) define the operative structure shared by both *Guanxi* creating and corruption as a “psychological

²⁷ Tact involves indirect and obscure circumlocutions in describing events (Bayraktaroglu 1991; Brown 1987:10) that nevertheless allow the cognoscenti to understand what is being alluded to (Chang 1999).

²⁸ “An ethnographic understanding of *Guanxi* and corruption in China needs to attend to the ways in which social performances influence whether or not transactions are perceived by its participants as being corrupt or not. This is a distinct process from that of labeling, where those with the power to impose “performative utterances” label or define certain instances as being corrupt despite their similarities with other instances that might not be sanctioned in the same way. Ordinary members of society often see legal acts as corrupt. They may also reject the label of corrupt applied by legal functionaries to other practices seen by these ordinary people as socially acceptable. A successful tactful performance requires the voluntary complicity of all the parties involved, including outside observers” (Smart and Hsu 2013).

kidnapping model.” Based on case studies, they depict the concrete procedures of the initiating, building, and using of *Guanxi*. Jennifer C. Franco et al. (2014), founding their study upon reflections on Jean Oi’s local state corporatism concept, coin the term “Neo-Guanxilism” to describe personalistic bonding that bears a function of coordinating the everyday politics of local government officials. Also adopting case analysis as a research method, they illustrate how Neo-Guanxilism arises as a response to China’s unique political-economic institutional settings.

Having provided more first-hand fieldwork data and revealed the significance of examining tact performance for corruption studies, recent works with a social-cultural perspective shed light on a series of directions for future explorations, which are specifically manifested as a series of questions that remain to be answered. For example, “[t]here is still quite a lively and unresolved debate about the extent to which Guanxi-related corruption is a uniquely Chinese phenomenon (Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002), and does the Chinese experience implicate certain general social principles in all human societies? What is the universal principle that dominates tact performance? Which conceptualisation is best for illustrating the causal relationship between *Guanxi* practice and corruption? What is the fundamental principle according to which social subjects totalise different expectations and value standards, namely performing tact? How are individual and collective interests connected? Why do certain values and institutions survive over time while some others do not? Moreover, what can we learn from the mechanism that endorses corruption and how can we apply it to explain social phenomena in the other social realms? Lastly and most essentially, none of the current explanatory frames has explicitly elucidated the dynamic relationship between institutions and social values. To answer these questions, we need to absorb more theoretical thoughts and develop a relative comprehensive frame that can bridge the scattered thoughts together.

The Thesis of Tacit Rationality

Given the limitations and inspirations of the principal-agent model and the social-cultural approach, what remains to be explained – which also constitutes the crux of the puzzle about the routinisation of corruption – is why formal institutions (not only those established with the aim of curbing corruption but the whole complex of formally prescribed institutions) are not respected, while some other institutions (informal ones that do not exclude corrupt exchanges) are constantly reinforced? To address the puzzle, some new approaches have been developed

to amend the two primary paradigms. Informed by these ideas, I propose a thesis centering around tacit rationality to explain the reinforcement of corruption-inclusive informal institutions. The following section explains in detail how my theoretical frame evolves from existing theories about corruption.

An instrumental perspective toward institutions

To a certain extent, the principal-agent model and social-cultural approaches are grounded in an old institutional perspective. This school of thought takes institutions as given constraints – the “quality” of which inherently relates to the political-economic structure – and concentrates on the functioning of formal institutions from a normative and static view. Such a view is specifically manifested in the way classical studies define corruption. As Johnston (1996) indicated, corruption has been perceived in terms of its violating of a variety of standards. However, the classical perspective pays little attention to whether the ideal institutions meet the needs of individual actors in real practice. The separation in previous institutional thinking between theory and real practice leads to a lack of explanatory capacity in the theories concerning corruption. The neo-institutional school of thought replaces the normative assumption concerning the quality of institutions with an instrumental perspective towards them, which also sheds light on the emergence of another approach to corruption. Building on their research into case of Italy, Della Porta and Vannucci suggest that “as with any other social relationship or collective enterprise, a corrupt exchange requires mechanisms of institutional governance that allow for coordination and cooperation among agents” (2005, 153). Accordingly, the neo-institutional approach looks at corruption from “within the corrupt networks,” focusing its analysis on “the hidden self-governance” of corruption (Della Porta and Vannucci 2016), namely the mechanisms that select the survivors from among institutions in terms of successful corrupt exchanges.

Central to its conceptual apparatus is transaction cost – the corrupt actors’ capacity to betray each other. Compared to the concept of “the invisible hand” representing the hidden power of the free market, Lambsdorff (2005) metaphorically refers to transaction costs as “the invisible foot.” The new institutional approach contends that, by selectively and instrumentally invoking different sets of universalistic (formal) and particularistic (informal) institutions to guarantee corrupt ties, i.e., to reduce the transactional cost of corrupt exchanges, participants of illicit transactions strengthen the corruption-facilitating institutions, and these institutions

in turn reinforce corruption as rules. (Schweitzer 2005). Instead of providing a concrete toolkit for a solution, this research stream proposes a general direction for anti-corruption efforts: “corrupt actors can neither commit to honestly serving the public nor credibly promise reciprocity to their corrupt counterparts [...]. [W]e should make corruption as arduous as possible” (Lambsdorff 2007, 109).

The most important contribution of the neo-institutional perspective is to explain the consolidation of informal patterns by introducing an evolving and instrumental perspective towards institutions. But this approach tends to fall into a “chicken-egg conundrum.” By taking corruption as the goal and focusing on the self-governance of corruption networks, it views corruption as an isolated phenomenon and degenerates into a tautology. As stated by Della Porta and Vannucci:

Once a certain organizational texture and ‘cultural adaption’ to corruption has developed, governance structures and enforcement mechanisms provide internal stability to illegal dealings in specific areas of public activity, reducing uncertainty among partners in relationships which thus appear more lucrative and less morally censurable. [...] The heritage of corruption in the past produces increasing returns in subsequent periods by neutralizing moral barriers, by creating more profitable opportunities rooted in formal procedures and decision-making processes, and by providing organizational shields and mechanisms of protection against external intrusion by the authorities and internal friction among corrupt actors. (Porta and Vannucci 2016, 14)

The neo-institutional approach thus attributes the persistence of corruption to the establishment of an adapting texture of corruption, which leads it to overlook the larger structural mechanism underlying the original process of how an internal, stable adaption has come into being. This approach thus offers a powerful tool to explain why pervasive corruption persists while it does not emphasise the mechanism underlying the “need” of corruption at the very beginning. This entails a consideration of the “function” of corruption-facilitating informal institutions from a more holistic view. My fieldwork experience in China shows that the institutional governance that guarantees the success of corrupt exchange also functions in other realms. Maximising tangible self-interest is not the only motivation behind the establishment and reinforcement of these informal institutions. In other words, corruption does not have to be the goal but is more like a tool for creating or maintaining a commitment which constitutes the foundation of social interaction in a broader sense.²⁹

²⁹ For example, when the promotion of an officer can be realised only if he can build a close personal relationship with his superior, but not through the formal prescribed procedure, he will have to build such a

The organisational perspective of human action

The organisational approach to corruption provides an alternative viewpoint for perceiving the generation and function of corruption-inclusive informal institutions. It complements the neo-institutional approach by pointing out the limitation of the individualistic vision of corruption and replacing it with an organisational one. In this sense, the individual agency is linked to social relations and the context, especially the functioning process of an organisation. At the core of its explanatory apparatus is the concept of organisational integrity, which is defined by Pulay (2014, 134) as the capacity of an organisation to maintain a variety of socially expected values and to restrain its employees from working according to these values. And based on an organisational view of the definition of integrity, this approach hypothesizes that there is a negative correlation between the level of organisational integrity and the level of corruption. Studies developing from this line of thinking explain the pervasiveness of corruption within an organisation by referring to the weakening of an organisation's capability of maintaining its integrity through formal channels. Accordingly, corruption becomes institutionalised as part of the mechanism that maintains the functioning of the organisation itself, something already installed into the organisation beyond individual choice. Gault (2017, 828-829) indicates that corruption should not be defined as "the decision made by an individual during a transaction with another individual or group of individual," but as a "negotiated classification of a behavior before an inherent quality on the behaviour itself." Thereby, corruption is not only rational in the sense of a personal utilitarian calculation but also relational and emotional (Chugh, Bazerman and Banaji 2005).

Centering around the inquiry of in what sense corruption benefits the operating of the organisation, the organisational approach focuses its analysis on how corruption becomes normalised within an organisation. Ashforth and Anand have proposed three mutually interdependent pillars underlying the normalisation of corruption:

- (1) institutionalization, the process by which corrupt practices are enacted as a matter of routine, often without conscious thought about their propriety;
- (2) rationalization, the process by which individuals who engage in corrupt acts use socially constructed accounts to legitimate the acts in their own eyes; and
- (3) socialization, the process by which newcomers are taught to perform and accept the corrupt practices. (Ashforth and Anand 2003)

relationship which inevitably involves all kinds of implicit or explicit favour-exchanges and promises. Some might pertain to corruption, and some might not.

Endorsed by the abovementioned pillars, corruption is generally conceived of as creating a bond between and therefore guaranteeing cooperation among the members within the organisation, especially through a process of rationalisation. It is thus “neutralised” (Granovetter 2004) as a morally acceptable practice. Cadre corruption in China perfectly echoes this hypothesis. Many cadres assert that they take part in corrupt practices not purely out of personal consideration but also to fulfil the task assigned by the Party as part of its organisational goals. As one of my interviewees said, “doing something means dealing with different forces and thus involving various kinds of social bonds and activities, many of which belong to the realm where state-prescribed regulations and personal favour-exchanging intertwine with each other. Sometimes it is really difficult to preserve the purity of your actions.”

Regarding the Chinese case, Lü Xiaobo (2000) proposes an organisational involution approach to understand corruption in post-revolutionary communist countries. He conceptualises corruption as one type of many official deviances,³⁰ whereby official deviance refers to “all forms of behaviour that deviate from the prescribed norms.” Lü explains the reinforcement of informal, deviant institutions by examining the “logic of actual operation” of a political party in maintaining its integrity within a concrete historical context. Drawing on Jowitt’s (1983) work on corruption in post-revolutionary communist regimes,³¹ Walder’s (1986) idea about “neo-traditionalism,”³² and Geertz’s (1963; 1991) concept of “agricultural involution,”³³ he defines the organisational involution as a process that “differs from [...]

³⁰ Behaviours deviate from both state law and organizational discipline, which include not only corruption but also misconduct such as irresponsible working attitude, statistical falsification, formalism, and so on.

³¹ Jowitt (1983, 275) defined “organizational integrity” as “an organization’s practical (not simply rhetorical) ability to sustain a specific competence by identifying socio-political tasks and enforcing strategies that subordinate particular member to general organizational interests,” and “for a Leninist party, organizational integrity means the competence to sustain a combat ethos among political office holders who act as disciplined, deployable agents.” For the later part of the state, Jowitt referred to Philip Selznick (1952, 18–25).

³² The concept of “neo-traditional image” was applied by Walder (1986) to “conceptualize the distinctive characteristics of communist political authority centering around a theoretical request that “why particular institutional and cultural patterns common to a side variety of premodern and early modern settings [...] are incorporated in the modern institutions of some societies, but transformed in others.” Lü (2000, 22–23) drew on his idea and further interpreted neo-traditionalism as an authoritarian relation shaped during the process “whereby a revolutionary party, while adopting and expanding many ‘modern’ (i.e. rational, empirical, impersonal) structures, refuses and fails to adapt itself to, and be transformed by, the routinization and bureaucratization that characterize modern bureaucracy.

³³ The theory of agricultural involution is used by Geertz (1963) to explain the process of ecological change in Indonesia. As Geertz (1991) further interpreted in another article, involution – a concept he borrowed from the American anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser – simply means “change without progress,” “a situation when

evolutional development, which maintains revolutionary integrity, and devolutionary development, which results in bureaucratisation and abandonment of the revolutionary ideology and its goals.”³⁴ The involution of the post-revolutionary communist party “produces neither rational, role-conscious, and rule-oriented modern bureaucrats, nor well-maintained, disciplined, and committed revolutionary cadres, but disillusioned, status-conscious, and undisciplined cadres” (Lü 2000, 23-27) whose behaviour deviates from formal rules and policies. Adopting a historical approach, Lü argues that the reinforcement of traditional modes of operation within the party is an eclectic solution to the maintenance of the organisation’s operation.³⁵

The most significant contribution of the organisational approach is to link individual decision-making to the collective context, as well as to highlight the mechanism behind the routinisation of corruption in terms of the organisational processes. It thus opens a space for a further discussion about why these patterns are valid in maintaining the organisation’s operation and how exactly they function. However, this approach is also criticised for its neglect of the larger social structures that also exert influence on individual and organisational behaviours (Misangyi, Weaver, and Elms 2008). Further consideration is needed regarding to what extent applying an organisational approach to corruption studies help to reveal general principles that dominate social functioning, and how we can use the implications found from the experience of one organisation to explain the problems confronting the other ones?

Tacit rationality: Viewing the functioning of corruption-related informal institutions within the organisation through the lens of social interaction

Informed by the neo-institutional and organisational approach, I hypothesise that the routinisation of corruption-inclusive informal institutions can be understood from the viewpoint that they meet certain inherent needs of the organisation – be it a narrow-sense organisation such as a political party or a whole society. An emerging line of thinking

some cultural forms that having reached a definitive form (when confronting limited resource), continued to develop by becoming internally more complicated.”

³⁴ Murphy and Fong (2013) further reviewed organisational involution as “a historical process whereby organisations rely on a familiar set of self-perpetuating but inefficient operational strategies that prevent more effective formal and informal norms and practices from evolving.”

³⁵ Adopting a historical approach, some other themes have also emerged “the developmental trajectory of the post-revolution Chinese party/state, the dynamics between leaders and staff in a Communist regime, the changing role of the state in market reforms, and a characterization of the contemporary Chinese administrative elite” (Lü 2000, 229).

developed within the organisational frame provides an approach to identifying and examining this need by highlighting the interactive nature of actions within an organisation. Influenced by the literature on convention and deep structure of organisation,³⁶ the interactive perspective on corruption studies builds on the premise that the existence of an organisation depends on the smooth operation of cooperative interaction among individual members, and that sustained interaction is rooted in rationalisation in terms of eliminating uncertainty. Oriented towards the need of cooperation, a complex of typified and scripted modes of interacting (institutions) comes into being, and “the successful performance and recurrence of a social interaction typically foster its own legitimacy and justification” (Barley and Tolbert 1997) (Gomez and Jones 2000). Warburton (2001, 222) proposes that “[c]orrupt transactions occur between actors as the result of social interaction. For corrupt transactions to occur there must be communication between two or more individuals [...] corrupt approaches are usually made in face to face meetings where as much nonverbal information can be conveyed and received in what is a highly complex social interaction.” Schoeneborn and Homberg (2018) explain corruption by examining “how do individual actors ensure the occurrence of ‘successful’ corrupt transactions and overcome the risk of sanctionability and stigmatization” based on survey data about how people get extra services by tipping waiters of the hotels in Vegas. They further indicated that “to learn what actions are appropriate in certain social situations and in what order” could be a fruitful way of understanding the success and institutionalisation of corrupt transactions.

The most enlightening contribution of this stream of literature is that conceptualising corruption as one form of social interaction extends existing explanations of what determines the success of corrupt transactions by shifting the locus of explanation to the social interaction itself (Schoeneborn and Homberg 2018, 38). Correspondingly, it brings into view the social-situational factors often overlooked in corruption studies. A growing number of scholars start to seek a complementary position within existing research by introducing a theoretical perspective that addresses the situational context of corrupt transactions, especially in the case of strongly institutionalised practices of corruption where “the strength of the situation may overwhelm individual propensities” (Ashforth et al. 2008, 679).

³⁶ See Schumpeter (1989), Granovetter (1985), Schelling (1960), Gomez and Jones (2000), and Jagd (2007).

Therefore, I propose the thesis of tacit rationality, which refers to a deep mechanism of reasoning derived from the intrinsic demand for cooperative order in human society as an organic collective of individuals. People act within the fabric of social relations defined by all kinds of roles and obligations. They may have an aggregate of goals to pursue, either personal or collective, but no matter what nature these goals are, their realisation must be based on rationalisation or justification. It is also in this sense that tacit rationality is a rationality-oriented form of reasoning. Drawing on Goffman's idea about role-performing, I conceptualise an institution as expressive equipment that is repeatedly invoked by the performers. Therefore, as the tool that helps people to rationalise and thereby realise their goals, an institution's effectiveness does not rest on achieving perfection for its own sake but comes from its compliance with tacit rationality, as manifest in its ability to express or convey values. Especially when a performer must play multiple roles in front of the same audience – probably the most common experience in daily practice – they need to totalise different claims so that the action could be seen as rational from each view. An effective or “practical” institution may help people to express value a and b instead of forcing them to choose between a and b. Accordingly, an analytical frame of the effectiveness of an institution emanates from this view.

Research Significance

Centering around the core concept – tacit rationality – this research contributes to the literature of corruption studies in several aspects. By highlighting them in the following part of this section, I try to demonstrate how this study may complement existing theories while at the same time further elaborate my argument.

From the Structures Facilitating Corruption to the Mechanism Rationalising Corruption

Emanating from a relational view of rationality, I contend that the routinisation of corruption is a problem of rationalisation instead of one of optimisation. Superficially, corruption becomes pervasive because it helps to maximise personal interests, but the fundamental reason accounting for unavoidable corruption is, within certain social-historical contexts, a complex of informal patterns of behaviour that do not exclude corrupt practices are rationalised, one which my interviewees continually addressed: “This is how the society works.” Traditional explanations of corruption pay exclusive attention to the structural factors

facilitating and restricting corruption³⁷ and to a large extent mix two different questions: what allows corrupt practices to be successfully realised and why would people participate in corruption. However, the answer to the former does not explain the later. Especially when corruption appears to be unavoidable, people participate in corrupt practices not because corruption is technically realisable – though this might be part of the reason, but definitely not the only, nor the major one – but because they believe they need to. By switching the focus from the environmental structures that facilitate corruption to the mechanism behind the rationalisation of corruption, I base my explanation of the puzzle on the fundamental theoretical idea that subjective rationality endorses the validity of the objective rationality. Specifically speaking, whether people choose to participate in a certain activity or not is not determined by whether it is supported by the external conditions, but by whether they believe they should do it or not. Abundant experience shows that people choose not to participate in actions which they believe are illicit or illegal, though the conditions allow them to do so. Inversely, people will create chances by all means to achieve certain goals that they believe to be justifiable even when confronting harsh external conditions. Therefore, I propose a revision of the traditional assumption about human rationality, arguing that underlying the utilitarian and value-oriented rationality is a deeper mechanism of reasoning with an orientation around maintaining cooperative interaction and finally the order of the social system. Correspondingly, the connotation of being rational is not confined to following objective rationality; instead, it means being subjectively rational in the sense of complying with common expectations to sustain the cooperative interaction among social members. Attaining such rationality inherently relates to people's subjectivity developed through its constant conduct within a specific social-historical context.

Correspondingly, I further hypothesise that the routinisation of corruption is not rooted in greed or habitus but the inherent demand for cooperative order in a society. It is the hidden power that controls the functioning of society that “forces” people to take part in corrupt practices. It may be a truism that selfishness is part of human nature and “absolute clean

³⁷ Extensive literature reveals the correlation between political institutions, government policies, economic situation, social-cultural traditions and the scale, form and level of corruption. For representative works see questionnaires conducted by Transparency International about Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), LAPALOMBARA (1994), Round et al. (2008). Anderson and Tverdova (2003), Seligson (2002), Djankov et al. (2002), Shleifer and Vishny (1993), Montinola and Jackman (2002), Sun (2004), Cross-national poll of Treisman (2000), (2007), (2014), Mauro (1995), Marquis and Yang (2014), Olken (2007), You and Khagram (2005), Svensson (2005), and Faccio (2006), among others.

politics is a utopia that does not exist anywhere in the world” (Karklins 2005, 3), but it is also self-evident that human actions are not driven solely by biological imperatives (holding sway over economic and non-economic resources), for then there would be no cooperation – *no society* – in any form. Sometimes people sacrifice some interests to maintain a certain order of social life. As Schwartz indicated, human existence is founded on the “needs of individuals as biological organisms, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and survival and welfare needs of groups,” each representing a dimension of human motivation setting goals. These goals are articulated as values to signify what is important in our lives. It is the trade-off between relevant, competing values from all dimensions of motivation that defines “the best” and guides people’s attitudes and behaviours (Schwartz 2012, 4). Accordingly, how people apply the understanding of “the best” in real social interaction encompasses more than just competing over social resources. Tacit rationality thus provides a frame for understanding the principle behind the trade-off among different values.

From “Subject and Context” to “Subject in Context”

Drawing on Goffman’s dramaturgical approach toward human action, this research is grounded in a dynamic view of human motivational structures, in which it is presumed that there exists neither a preordained “self,” nor a fixed preference. Instead, who we are depends on who our audience is and thereby who the environment requires us to be, and a social subject adjusts his or her preference according to the concrete context.

Therefore, the analysis of corruption needs to switch its logic from “subject and context” to “subject in context,” which means that corruption studies should focus on how people actually perform instead of how they supposed to make choices. Scholars have realised the disadvantage of studying corruption in a “lab context” and the necessity of examining corruption in “ecologically realistic settings.” Gal et al. (2014, 268) have proved that covert activities such as corruption “occur in a more realistic manner than in traditional studies.” Camargo (2017, 2) has also indicated that “we need to take a closer look at how things actually happen, independently of how we would expect state institutions to perform according to good governance logic.” Currently, almost all existing explanations of corruption – whether adopting an individualistic or systemic perspective – explicitly or tacitly adopt a static assumption about human motivational structure, assuming the existence of a fixed preference of social subjects, and based on that, delve into trivial cost-benefit calculations.

Correspondingly, pervasive corruption is commonly attributed to either institutional flaws or a low average level of morality, while little attention has been paid to how criterions of judgments are invoked and balanced in concrete contexts. However, “social action is never an individual ego-centred pursuit. It takes place within networks of relations [...] and is bounded by certain social conventions, values and power relations” (Long 2001, 49–50). The constellation of values and how people apply them universally arise in specific historical and social settings (Mannheim 1936, 5). Accordingly, individuals take certain action not essentially because this action brought about profit space or they believe this action is morally appropriate but because this way of acting is most feasible. This entails an examination of “the subject’s whole mode of conceiving things” (Mannheim 1936, 5), of how people apply which sets of values under concrete social contexts. Therefore, as opposed to “taking values and tastes as given and perceiving individuals as rational beings attempting to further their self-interest in a world of scarce resources” (Rose-Ackerman 1978, 5), I propose a thesis centering around tacit rationality, making the focus of analysis how various values are reconciled.

There always exists some part of knowing that we could sense but not express. Knowledge of how to be a cadre also pertains to this realm of knowing. This knowledge cannot be learnt from training forums held by the Party School, neither from listening to predecessors talking about their experience. Instead, it is a repertoire established through constant practising within concrete circumstances dominated by tacit rationality. Cadres do not make decisions simply according to the formal requirements; nor do they have a firm criterion of right and wrong. When to apply formal rules and how much weight should be assigned to formal rules is guided by an inherent need to sustain the smooth operation of social interaction. The classic studies of corruption usually assume the existence of a firm identity of the public officials and correspondingly a predefined criterion of right and wrong. But because they separate agency from context, they cannot explain why formal institutions are not functioning well while certain informal patterns of behaving are created and reinforced. Tacit rationality enables us to examine agency within context. By taking into consideration situational factors, it offers an alternative approach towards the previous question by proposing that the effectiveness of an institution is determined by its capacity to fulfil the inherent demand for cooperative order of the society. This also explains why cadres consciously break the laws, as an exculpatory sentence that is frequently quoted by corrupt cadres states: “I break formal rules to comply

with a higher order.” This “higher-order” is tacit rationality. Moreover, drawing on the dramaturgical view of analysing human action, the concept of role “links the person – the thinking, acting individual – to a structured status in a set of social relations – which, in turn, is a component of a larger complex social system. The role, the status, the set of social relations, and the social structure are in turn normatively moderated just as they generate their own distinctive cultural meanings” (Blau 1995).

From the Function of “Greasing the Wheel” to the Function of Sustaining Social Order

Corruption is always regarded as illicit self-seeking rooted in the conflict between the individual and collective interest. While considering the cooperative nature of social action, this inference might be only half right. I propose a counterintuitive hypothesis that the routinisation of corruption is also partly rooted in the inherent need to sustain the social order as a collective good. To some extent, this study conceives the routinisation of corruption regarding its function. But different to most studies adopting a functionalist perspective that focuses mainly on the relationship between corruption and economic growth, this research ponders more the interactive social function of corrupt practices. Generally, scholars who advocate the functionalist approach account for the pervasiveness of corruption in certain areas – especially those with institutional arrangements that are deemed as not commensurate with the demand for development – by referring to its positive influence on economic growth. This line of thinking grounds its argument on the coexistence of pervasive corruption and rapid economic growth in some developing countries, exploring the potential function of corruption in terms of how it reduces the cost of economic activities.³⁸ Drawing on Durkheim, Mead and Merton’s thought about the function of deviant behaviour as well as Huntington and Scott’s view of modernisation, advocates contend that corruption is not so much a problem as a substitutive solution to the failure of the formal institutional complex to achieve certain goals, especially those concerning economic growth.³⁹ Therefore, corruption is seen as an efficient way of getting things done especially for investors and companies (Marquette and Peiffer 2015a), and as Lü (2000, 15) has described, corruption is “a functional

³⁸ For relevant research see Shleifer and Vishny (1993), Rose-Ackerman (1978), Murphy et al. (1991), Khan (2006), Faccio (2006), Wedeman (2012), Ering, Abonor, and Abul (2015), McKittrick (1957), McMullan (1961), Leff (1964), L. Wang (2016), Huntington (1971), and Lui (1985), etc.

³⁹ See Lü (2000), Schwertheim (2017) and Alatas (2018) for more complete and detailed reviews of the literature concerning this research perspective.

equalizer providing access to resources for various disadvantaged groups in the face of a blindly impersonal and inefficient bureaucracy.”

In a way, political-economic functionalist thought takes the pervasiveness of corruption as a rational choice made by the whole social system and as a holistic subject confronting certain historical circumstances. Ultimately, it is also based on a normative perspective on institutions and attributes corruption to structural factors typical of the politicisation of bureaucracy (Lü 2000, 16) and incomplete markets which, for example, create the space for rent-seeking. Scholars advocating this view attribute the pervasiveness of corruption – especially in countries where state control overwhelms the market principles – to the reason that it helps people bypass red tape as well as providing a complementary incentive for public officials.⁴⁰ In this sense, corruption is often seen as a way to grease the wheels of growth. This thought has a wide influence not only within academia but also among decision-makers. Its advocates use it to explain why the government has connived with the existence of “moderate” corruption or should do so. While the extreme of this thought leads to the inference that the anti-corruption effort is a politicalised or even manipulated distortion, which is very likely to bring the theoretical inquiry about corruption to a stalemate.

The traditional functionalist view has been quite influential among both academia and society since the 1970s (Osrecki 2017), but it has also been criticised for methodological shortcomings and bias in the selection of data (Alatas 2018, 606). First, it builds upon the assumption that the cost brought about by corrupt practices is less than that caused by bureaucratic procedures. But it is very difficult to find firm evidence to support the greasing the wheel theory, not to mention the harm of corruption to levels of equality and morality in society.⁴² Corruption might have a rational function in the sense of greasing the wheel, but it can also cause irrational results, for people fall into a loop by raising one benefit at the cost of another or reducing one cost by incurring a new one. The diffusion of illicit competition over resources leads to the rise of the transactional cost of daily interactions and the depleting of

⁴⁰ See Huntington (1968), Leys (1964), Bailey, (1966), Beck and Maher (1986), and Heberer and Schubert (2012), etc.

⁴² Literature supporting this view see Méon and Sekkat (2005), Méon (2010), Dreher and Gassebner (2013), (Y. Sun 2004, 11), and etc. A report by U4 also addressed that (<https://www.u4.no/functionalist-and-rational-choice-theories-of-corruption>), “[a] fairly large but inconclusive body of literature has emerged within the field of economics on the greasing versus sanding the wheels debate, with authors finding evidence that both supports and challenges the greasing the wheels theory.”

the state's capacity to provide services for all social members, which will ultimately be distributed to every individual. The sum of the newly added transactional cost and the loss of collective benefit will probably exceed the rewards of violating the rules.⁴³

The second limitation concerns the empirical evidence the idea depends on, which is the coexistence of rapid growth and corruption in some areas. Though corruption might “contribute” to economic development, there is also a possibility that the rate of growth would be higher without corruption. We will not have a firm conclusion unless we can accurately measure to what extent corruption helps increase efficiency. Moreover, we cannot affirm that it is corruption instead of some other factors that help to maintain economic growth and thus the functionalist approach hasn't explicitly identified which sets of formal functions corruption is responsible for. In short, the functionalist approach proposes a hypothesis, a possibility, which is almost impossible to prove.

Despite the everlasting debate around whether corruption greases or sands economic growth which is inherently related to methodological restrictions, I suggest that it does not matter whether we can get firm evidence proving either side of the argument. This is because the essential function of corruption consists in sustaining the social order, and in providing a channel of achieving substantial goals through a commonly accepted method. This is to say, given certain situational constraints, following some informal patterns of acting – which might probably entail corruption – constitutes the most rational way of behaving. The point is neither what concrete goal – either reducing unnecessary costs or gaining illicit interests – corruption serves nor whether it really reduces the cost, but why people consciously choose this way over a formal one to realise their goals. By adopting an instrumental perspective on institutions, this study does not look at the explicit “benefits” brought about by corruption to the economic development but approaches its function in terms of how it serves to fulfil the inherent demand for social order. Accordingly, I hypothesise that when corruption becomes unavoidable, it should be seen as a tool rather than the goal. Though it is condemned as illicit and illegal from the normative view of both state law and common morality, it accords with tacit rationality from a practical view.

⁴³ “The losses caused by corruption far exceed the sum of individual profits derived from it, because graft distorts the whole economy. Important decisions are determined by ulterior and anti-social motives regardless of the consequences to the community” (Andreski 67-68).

Chapter 1 Theoretical Framing and Methodological Approach

1.1 Theoretical Framing of the Research

Tacit Rationality

At the core of this study's theoretical frame is tacit rationality. Being rational simply means taking action for one or an aggregate of reasons or goals. Rationality here refers to the state of being rational based on a certain reason. In the most common sense, a goal refers to either maximising one form of utility that can make people feel happy or pursuing a certain value that is believed by the subject to be important. Correspondingly, an action can be seen as irrational if it is taken for no reason, for example, out of an impulse of affection or an automatically habituated compliance with tradition. So far, as presented by Simon's (1957) theory of "bounded rationality," it is well-recognised that, due to a series of restrictions such as cognitive limitation and inadequate information processing, human actions are neither fully rational nor fully irrational but somewhat approximately or partly rational.

However, developed based on a view of relationism rather than relativism, tacit rationality demonstrates not a limited rationality but a deeper mechanism of reasoning as underlying utilitarian and value-oriented rationality, a rationality that inherently relates to the social subject's situational position. I propose that human action is ultimately dominated by this tacit rationality which is oriented towards the goal of sustaining the smooth operation of cooperative interaction and, by extension, the functioning order of the social system. Here order does not mean any ideal status based on a certain utopian criterion which disregards individual interest and differences. Instead, it refers to a balanced condition when various expectations claimed by different social relations are delicately situated within one total frame.⁴⁴ Such a goal is realised through a process of rationalising or justifying instead of optimising, for an action that does not conform to the common expectation within the society will lead to confusion or even chaos (Winter 1964). Different from utilitarian and value-oriented rationality which can be explicitly expressed, communicated and consciously followed, tacit rationality can be sensed but not explained in words. People are hardly aware that they are acting under its domination, even if they can feel its existence, and are not able

⁴⁴ The concrete path towards order might change from place to place, time to time, or case to case. But the demand for order is beyond question. It is the foundation for cooperation in human society.

to tell what exactly it is and therefore often depict it as just a feeling. In this sense, it pertains to a tacit realm of knowledge. As indicated by Polanyi (1966), “we know more than we can tell,” there is always some knowledge that can be gained only through “knowing-how” instead of “knowing-what,” like recognising a face, driving a car, riding a bike and swimming. Similarly, people gain rationalising-oriented rationality not from training in words but through constant practising or conducting.⁴⁵

Polanyi initially raised the concept of “tacit knowing” to explain the process through which our knowledge about the world – especially scientific discovery – is constructed. Aiming at answering the question “how can we discover something new when we do not even know what it is,” he derived his discussion from Gestalt psychology and illustrated the vital influence of a tacit sensation for the revealing and developing of new knowledge. Tacit knowing manifests a comprehensive process that is rooted in a subject’s social status, the concrete context, values and traditions instead of pure scepticism, and of logical thinking. The key to acquiring tacit knowledge is experience, or more accurately, tacit knowledge is constructed based on the gradual establishment of the links between certain unconscious actions or stimuli and the accompanying results. Tacit rationality precisely fits this feature, for people unconsciously gain the knowledge of how to practice it through constant interacting with other members in society.

If the term “tacit” describes the rationalising-oriented rationality in terms of its form, then “relational” can be used to depict its substantial functioning mechanism. Inspired by Mannheim’s relationism theory about human intellectual activity, the thesis of tacit rationality emanates from a premise that people’s worldview and actions are relational. At the centre of Mannheim’s thought is the balancing of “actual thinking” and its “social or existential determination”⁴⁶:

it is not men in general who think, or even isolated individuals who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought in an endless series of responses to certain typical situations characterising their common position. (Mannheim 1936, 3).

⁴⁵ Conducting, according to Mannheim’s definition, refers to “making decisions in situations which have as yet not been subjected to regulation” (Mannheim 1936, 115).

⁴⁶ Mannheim emphasised that “by determination, we do not mean [...] a mechanical cause-effect sequence: we leave the meaning of ‘determination’ open, and only empirical investigation will show us how strict is the correlation between life-situation and thought-process⁴⁶ (Mannheim 1936, 267). In German version of “Ideology and Utopia,” determination is expressed as “Seinsverbundenheit des Wissens.”

Mannheim maintained that all knowledge – what people know and believe about the world – is relational. There is no such thing as absolute truth or objectivity for its own sake “independently of the values and position of the subject and unrelated to the social context,” only different interpretations emanating from different life-situations which manifest themselves as “the very different expectations, purposes, and impulses arising out of the experience.” The same object could present itself to different subjects in varying ways, while the “world is known through many different orientations” (Mannheim 1936, 269). As Wirth (1936, xvii) states in reviewing Mannheim, “the earlier discussion of objectivity laid stress upon the elimination of personal and collective bias [...] and tended to posit an ‘object’ which distinct from the ‘subject,’” while Mannheim saw “an intimate relationship between the object and the perceiving subject.”⁴⁷

In short, the criterion of objectivity lies not in the object, but in the subject, or more accurately, the subject in context. Different subjects with a different social status perceive the same object in different ways, while the same subject could perceive an object from various views when they are conducting within different contexts. It is noticeable that by asserting all knowledge to be relational, Mannheim did not mean to advocate a relativist perception that there was no way to distinguish between truth and falsity. What he intended to emphasise was that the path towards an objective perception of the world must base itself on admitting the distortion produced by subjectivity instead of eliminating it. Guided by relational thinking, social action is also relational. Experience has shown that there is no “best” way of acting – no absolute right – or wrongdoing transcending the subjectivity confined by context – only the most justifiable way. Or we could say that the legitimacy of action is not determined by whether it is either optimal or the most noble for its own sake in terms of certain objective criterion. Instead, the best action should be the most justifiable action.

Under the dominance of tacit rationality-oriented reasoning, people make decisions following the principle of seeking reasonable or justifiable solutions that comply with the context. The

⁴⁷ The original statement by Wirth is as follows: “In fact, [...] the object emerges for the subject, when, in the course of experience, the interest of the subject is focused upon that particular aspect of the world. Objectivity thus appears in a two-fold aspect: one, in which object and subject are discrete and separate entities, the other in which the interplay between them is emphasized. Whereas objectivity in the first sense refers to the reliability of our data and the validity of our conclusions, objectivity in the second sense is concerned with relevance to our interests. In the realm of the social, particularly, truth is not merely a matter of a simple correspondence between thought and existence, but is tinged with the investigator’s interest in his subject matter, his standpoint, his evaluations, in short, the definition of his object of attention” (Wirth in Mannheim 1936, xvii–xviii).

most crucial point about a good solution is that it does not have to be “‘objectively’ rational on its own,” but “to appear reasonable to others” (Gomez and Jones 2000, 698).⁴⁸ This deep-seated tacit rationality gives sense not only to tangible goals but also actions that seem to be irrational within concrete contexts. It determines how people decide when to practice which kind of values and to apply the corresponding way of calculating, as well as how people assign weight to different values if they have to follow multiple logics of reasoning simultaneously. In other words, the realisation of all explicit goals has to be based on one premise, that is, only if they can be well situated within an underlying frame of justification, meanwhile, all seemingly irrational actions are also endorsed with a certain validity within this frame.

To take an example, when A wants to sell her second-hand car to B, if B is a stranger who sees the sales information in a newspaper or on a website and calls to inquire, she would probably adopt a pure interest-maximising oriented way of calculating and try to sell the car for a price as high as possible. But if B is her best friend, she might consider affectional factors and sell her car for a lower price or even directly give the car to B as a gift. It seems that A’s decision in the former scenario is rational and that some irrational element is involved in the latter, but from the point of view of tacit rationality, both decisions are rational. A pure interest calculation is taken in the interaction with the stranger because it is the most suitable way of acting, of confronting a circumstance of doing business with a customer, but not because such a principle of calculating is suitable for all contexts. Selling the car for a lower price or giving it to the friend as a present is no less rational, because most people believe that there is no need to apply a pure interest-oriented principle to the interaction between friends. In the end, what A is doing is not simply giving up some interest out of an affectional impulse but rather she is doing this to maintain the certain order and

⁴⁸ Mary Douglas (1986) has raised similar argument by indicating that “human reasoning cannot be corrected through coercion” and the internalisation of an institution entails “a meshing of sub-plans,” namely “squeezing each other’s ideas into a common shape in order to prove their legitimacy by sheer numbers.” She further maintained that “Not just any busload or haphazard crowd of people deserves the name of society: there has to be some thinking and feeling alike among members [...] utilitarianism could never account for the foundations of civil society [...]. [A] social order is produced automatically out of the self-interested actions of rational individuals was too limited because it gave no explanation of group solidarity [...] the social basis of [a] cognition conformity internalizing idea of social order and sacralising it. [...] [I]ndividuals carry the social order around inside their heads and project it out onto nature.”

connection between her and her friend in accordance with common expectation within society.

Totalising

As mentioned above, the crux of realising tacit rationality lies in rationalising, which refers to a process through which the social subject justifies his action to his counterpart in the interaction by asserting that certain commonly-accepted values are being realised. In addition, this invokes which set of values depend on what “role” the subject is playing. Conceiving the performative character of the rationalising process, the construction of a practical analytical frame of how tacit rationality is realised can be seen to echo Goffman’s dramaturgical theory about social interaction. According to Goffman, all human activities can be seen as performance⁴⁹ “on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way of the other participants” (Goffman 1959, 15). Accordingly, he proposed that the individual subject should be simultaneously viewed as both performer and role.⁵⁰ Here performer refers to “a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance,” and role as “a figure, typically, a fine one, whose spirit, strength, and other sterling qualities the performance was designed to evoke” (Goffman 1959, 252). The fine quality or impression that the performer tries to evoke in front of his audience – his counterpart in the interaction – under the guise of the role is what Goffman called “an idealized view of the situation” (Goffman 1959, 35). Specifically speaking, it consists of a set of commonly accepted values determining the rights and obligations of each participant in the interaction under a certain social relationship. For instance, waiters in restaurants are supposed to be polite and considerate in front of guests, and a mother usually plays a patient and guiding role when interacting with her children. Since these systems of values are taken for granted by people as “justified de facto” and provide “criteria for rationalization which need no justification in themselves,” some scholars also call them “rational voids” (Gomez and Jones 2000, 698). Some idealised views among social members are attributed with unquestioned, universal, and natural validity; some others are assigned such a status through an official channel to avoid uncertainty, but the existence of all idealised views that regulate different social relations

⁴⁹ Goffman defined performance as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (Goffman 1959, 22).

⁵⁰ In Goffman’s treatise, sometimes role is also called character or mask.

serves one aim, that is, to put an end to infinite doubt and cross-justification. In other words, rational voids constitute the foundation for order of a society.

Totalising can be understood as a multifaceted rationalising process that takes place when a performer has to play a series of different roles simultaneously in front of the same members of an audience. Specifically speaking, all social subjects act within many relations, and each of them defines one role of the subject. This means that for most of the time, the definition of a situation is influenced by multiple idealised views. Confronting different criteria for acting, the performer has to reconcile different values in a sophisticated way and accordingly manage his performance to make it appear rational or acceptable from each view. This process of seeking a structure for performing within which all expectations can be seated is totalising:

In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. Because these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But, qua performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized. Our activity, then, is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality [...] it may well be that the more attention we give to these goods, then the more distant we feel from them and from those who are believing enough to buy them. To use a different imagery, the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces on to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage. (Goffman 1959, 251)

The concept of totalising brings us back to the core of Goffman's idea. By asserting that there is no true self, no identifiable performer behind the roles, he challenged the notion that each of us has a preordained character, a psychological self-identity and correspondingly a more or less static and fixed reference:

[T]his self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Goffman 1959, 252–53)

According to Goffman, who we are does not depend on a predestined character but depends on who the society expects us to be. Specifically, our identity is determined by where we are, which roles we play, and finally how we manage these roles. In each circumstance, we may have a main character centering around a major goal, but we are always at the same time part

of all the other characters. Accordingly, social subjects keep adjusting the motivational structure to sustain cooperative interaction with each other. We may sacrifice part of our individual interests to keep a good relationship, or we may give up some moral principle to seek utilitarian fulfilment. But no matter how we totalise, we are always dominated by tacit rationality, with the goal of “saving the show” and ultimately to maintain the order of society.

This is also where Goffman’s thought merges with Mannheim’s. In essence, they both advocated a relational perspective. Goffman applied this view specifically to self-identity and built his whole frame around a fundamental argument that the construction of self is related to context. Mannheim by contrast, focused on people’s intellectual view of the world, aiming at proposing a relational approach towards truth and objectivity. Bringing their thoughts into one frame helps to build up a theoretical perspective that links subject to context. This perspective enables us to conceive further how subjective pursuits are aligned to the creating of a functioning social order as a collective good as well as why some social structures are endowed with prior rightness (Douglas 1986, 10) while some others are not.

The Effectiveness of an Institution: Its Expressive Capacity

Institutions are formally-coded or naturally formed “rules and procedures that structure social interaction by constraining and enabling actors’ behaviour” (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727). From a dramaturgical view, they can be seen as expressive equipment that is repeatedly employed by the performers to convey a certain value (Goffman 1959, 22). Goffman called such expressive equipment adopted in daily social performance a “front” or “line,” which specifically refers to “a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation” (Goffman 1967, 5). In this sense, an institution is an institutionalised front or line, a ready-made module consisting of a collection of actions as the concrete expression of certain values and expectations that, by being frequently employed in daily practice, is reinforced and internalised.

Based on this conceptualisation, I propose that the effectiveness of an institution should be examined from an instrumental perspective rather than a normative one. In other words, we cannot assess the functioning of an institution without conceiving the subject’s or performer’s role and the idealised view of the situation involved in context. The effectiveness of an

institution lies not in its technical or logical perfection but in its expressive capacity to convey the common value claimed by the situation.⁵¹ As Goffman stated,

[t]o the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look upon it, in the manner of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, as a ceremony – as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community” (Goffman 1959, 35).

Accordingly, an institution which can express the values claimed by one role might not express values entailed by another. In addition, an institution that addresses a single view of the situation may lack expressive capacity when confronting the need to convey multiple views. This study specifically concentrates on the latter circumstance.

When confronting a situation simultaneously defined by multiple idealised views, the subject needs expressive equipment which can squeeze different values or expectations into one set of symbolic acts. If there is an already-existing institution, it will be reinforced; if there isn't any ready-made equipment, they will construct one, and this newly-created equipment will gradually develop and consolidate itself as an institution.⁵² Ultimately, how people make choices from alternative expressive equipment is determined by the tacit rationality, which finally points to maintaining the smooth-running of their performance and therefore to the balanced status of society. Whether an institution is valid within a certain context, namely whether it is effective depends on whether it is deemed to be in accordance with tacit rationality. Specifically, when it comes to a context defined by multiple relations, the effectiveness of an alternative institution depends on its compatibility with totalising. In short, within such a context, an effective institution complying with tacit rationality serves to express a part of all values rather than force people to choose between one and or another.

A typical example comes from how CPC cadres manage their duty by referring to informal institutions. When I was conducting fieldwork in China, many cadres mentioned a sense or feeling of telling right and wrong, and they described it in Chinese as “*zhike yihui, buke yanchuan*.” They told me that in daily practice, they could not just follow formal laws and

⁵¹ The capacity of “holding contradictory opinions simultaneously” and “reconciling contradictory subject-positions” (Hall and O’Shea 2013, 11).

⁵² “In addition to the fact that different routines may employ the same front, it is to be noted that a given social front tends to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the same time to be performed in its name. The front becomes a ‘collective representation’ and a fact in its own right” (Goffman 1959, 27).

regulations, nor did they behave according to their own free will but had to carefully balance themselves between rigid rules and discretionary space, official obligations and personal feelings. Under the domination of this tacit rationality, the cadres follow a complex of informal institutions among which one is particularly typical, that is, to maintain the smooth-functioning of routines in the work-unit, and as leaders to build up close personal relationships with their subordinates. This is even more important than working competence. The establishment and consolidation of such relationships are based on constant exchanges of favours, which may require both the sacrifice of principles and of personal interests.

In essence, institutions serve to maintain such a balance, and a concrete example given by one of my interviewees properly demonstrates this inference:

Cadre XX: “We should not do everything according to the (textual) rules [...] they are rigid and lifeless. Decisions should be made by ‘case by case’ [...] Let me give you an example. One regulation says that civil servants should not take personal leave more than 60 days per year; otherwise, they should be fired. But one of my colleagues has a really heavy burden of family issues, and he took more than 60 days off last year, what do you think should our head of department do?”

I: “Fire him?”

Cadre XX: “Of course not! If the leader did that, everyone would think that he is mean and harsh to his subordinates, he will lose his reputation. Besides, the leader might also have to take personal leave from time to time, and of course, he also does not want the others to report him. If we fight with each other all the time over these small things, how can we do our job? But the discipline is still discipline, the leader talked to this officer and asked him to try to follow the regulation, not only for himself but also for not letting his leader get into trouble.”

In the case mentioned above, the leader was well aware of the rule, but he did not arbitrarily follow it. Instead, he took a more reasonable way to deal with the problem directed by the sense of behaving – of tacit rationality. We can here conceive of the leader as a performer and his subordinates as the audience. From the view of public duty, he is the leader and supervisor who is supposed to stick to impartiality and discipline; given the personal relationship, he is their colleague or friend who should also show care and tolerance. These two roles claim different standards to follow, which means he has to totalise different expectations. By talking to the person who took leave of over 60 days, he reminded all the subordinates of the existence and importance of the regulation, as his duty requires him to do. And by conceding rigid discipline by means of not punishing the rule-breaking official, he maintained a harmonious relationship between him and his subordinates. He not only gained gratitude from the person who was supposed to be punished but also built up a good impression as a concerned, kind leader in front of the other colleagues. In return, since the personal feeling of

the officials had been taken care of by their leader, his colleagues would support him by avoiding rule-breaking behaviour and being more coordinated in their daily routines. Finally, the function of this department can be realised based on a cooperative atmosphere. This example shows how people totalise different expectations under the domination of tacit rationality. The most appropriate or widely-accepted solution towards the order is not to achieve one expectation completely but to realise each expectation partly. The informal institution mentioned above provides such an acceptable solution. Therefore, it is constantly reinforced.

A Hierarchical Perspective toward Different Types of Rationality and its Implication for the Causal Explanation of Social Action

When corruption appears to be “unavoidable,” a contradiction is evident in such a situation. On the one hand, corruption is no doubt a deviant behaviour against certain norms, and this is why people denounce it. While on the other hand, corruption seems to possess some legitimacy, which gives people a reason to rationalise it. In this sense, corruption manifests itself not as an intentional law-breaking action with a solely instrumental aim but as an inevitable choice entailed by certain informal operative procedures guaranteeing the cooperative interaction among social members. Though there is already a consensus among both academia and public that corruption is not always a matter of black and white, there is still no theoretical tool that accounts for the ambivalent nature of corruption, especially when it manifests itself as a collective and expected action that goes beyond individual control.

Why do people consciously choose to be corrupt even though they hate corruption and are aware of the risks involved? It seems arbitrary to reduce human agency to variables and decision-making processes into ruthless calculation as it cannot explain the randomness of action; neither is it a persuasive idea to conceive of agents as totally unconstrained elements. Underlying this unresolved empirical problem lies “a tension in corruption research (as in other social research) between actors being regarded as autonomous agents making (bounded) rational means-end calculations, and explaining corrupt behaviour by causes beyond individual control.” Moreover, a lack of studies on “actual, individual corruption cases” intensifies this tension (G. D. Graaf 2007, 41). To fill in this research gap entails a rethinking of the basic assumption about rationality that underpins the action of social subjects.

There are various interpretations of rationality from different disciplinary perspectives, among which economic man is the most commonly used trope. It presupposes that a rational human being always makes choices consistent with the goal of maximising utility, which mainly refers to economic interest. The economic assumption of rationality is often used interchangeably with what Max Weber calls instrumental rationality, which emphasises the calculated attribute of human behaviour while not showing normative concern about the legitimacy of either the means or the end of an action. Most corruption studies adopt economic rational man as their basic assumption. Hypothesising explicitly or implicitly that people are naturally prone to be selfish and to break the rules to fulfil personal goals, a large number of researchers devote attention to seeking a solution for corruption by focusing exclusively on how to adjust external conditions, namely the variables of the corruption equation.

However, though the economic man frame provides a powerful tool for explaining the generality of corruption, it is not enough for understanding the particularity of different scenarios or individual cases of corruption. When corruption becomes routinised and manifests a certain degree of compulsivity, it carries more meaning than pure self-seeking. Underlying the normalisation of corruption lies the question of why people consciously choose to be “irrational” in the sense of instrumental rationality. In such cases, they are deliberately violating the rules while fully aware that they risk the potential punishment, not to mention that they raise the transaction cost for the whole of society. Emanating from this dilemma, we could also note that the economic rational man assumption either cannot explain why “bad” people sometimes choose not to be corrupt when the benefits obviously outweigh the costs. Moreover, how can we explain the reasoning some people give that they have to break the rules out of loyalty to their friends? What is the mechanism that fundamentally dominates social subjects’ decision-making about balancing between utilitarian achievements with moral norms? How can we conceptualise it?

In short, the empirical puzzle about corruption prompts us to reconceive the dominant assumption about human motivation. It is not difficult to understand the illicit and illegal attributes of corruption; what still perplexes practitioners is the source of its legitimacy. Moreover, how can we situate the two opposite attributes of corruption into one theoretical frame? What forces “good” people to do bad things and why do “bad” people sometimes seem to behave well? Do people really act in accordance with instrumental rationality, or only

with instrumental rationality? How can we refine our assumptions about human rationality to provide a theoretical basis for probing the mechanisms underlying corruption?

Currently, there are two main directions arising from this debate. One concentrates on social subjects' capability of being rational. Represented by Herbert Alexander Simon's bounded rationality theory, this line of thinking does not question the goal but is more concerned with the extent to which an individual can approach an optimal result. It thus emphasises the limit of rational action by referring to the factors that are out of human beings' conscious control. In essence, this thought limits its discussion about human agency within a large frame of instrumental rationality and attempts to revise the traditional economic man assumption by expanding the range of external variables in the calculating equation. However, it still leaves the conscious subjective initiative of social actors unexplained.

Comparing with this idea, another direction is more pertinent to our inquiry, which concerns the legitimacy of the goal of an action. This stream of thinking suggests that a true rationality conception should include "not only instrumental rationality but rationality of ends." It contends that "[a] decision cannot be truly rational unless a persona is choosing what is really best" considering its long-term consequences, this person's morality and what is real happiness for him or her (Tomer 2008). Referring to Weber's sociological view of the ideal types of rationality, this perspective accounts for the source of legitimacy of action by introducing the concept of value rationality into the explanatory frame.⁵³ By considering that people could also take action out of certain ingrained beliefs and independently of outcome, it advocates attributing the persistence of corruption to culturally dominated values.

The latter idea witnesses the collision between instrumental and value rationality, directly helping to explain the source of legitimacy of rule-violating actions such as corruption. But it has not offered much inspiration for answering the question of why people continue to act in accordance with "backward" values even when being conscious of the wrongness of doing so. For example, it is a popular mentality among Chinese people that they are tired of and averse to a series of institutionalised face (*mianzi*)-related behavioural patterns, while, as revealed in my interviews, people at the same time asserted that they still had to somehow comply with those informal rules. Such ambivalence in fact symbolises a controversial issue about value

⁵³ As Weber indicated, sometimes traditional behavior with "varying degrees of self-consciousness" may also shade over into value rationality (Weber 1978, 25).

rationality, that is, whether pure value-oriented action exists, or in another way, whether value itself can be the ultimate goal.

This issue remains disputable given the fact that sometimes people act out specific values, but not because of their true belief in these values. Therefore, what endorses the reinforcement of ingrained values seems not to be the cogency of these values themselves but some other invisible force. Then the question becomes how we can conceptualise this invisible rationality. Moreover, how could the reflection of routinised corruption inspire us to revise how we conceive rationality, and thereby, how can such revision in turn help to explain the pervasiveness and normalisation of corruption? To provide an alternative solution to these questions, I propose that first we need to jump out of the mind trap of corruption studies.

For a long time, a consistent mode in all discourse about corruption is that corruption is wrong in terms of being against either prescribed rules of conduct or orthodox moral standards or both. We have always concentrated on the negative side of corruption and been convinced that it should be expunged, but seldom looked at its positive or neutral side. It is undeniably true that corrupt practices violate certain norms, but we have barely thought about another possibility, that is, that corruption becomes “unavoidable” within specific social contexts because it happens to coincide with some unrevealed law of social functioning.⁵⁴ Maybe what underpins the pervasiveness and persistence of corruption is not only the conflict between collective and individual interest which emerges from the intrinsically selfish human nature, nor the competition between instrumental and value rationality, but the need to comply with a higher principle inherently related to the existence of society.

This is how the thesis of tacit rationality comes into being. By conceptualising the invisible force underpinning the constant consolidation of “wrong” values as tacit rationality, as a rationalising-oriented reasoning, I propose a theoretical base that situates instrumental and value rationality into one analytical frame. Thus the core argument of this thesis is that the relation between instrumental and value rationality is hierarchical instead of parallel or even in conflict. I argue that all human actions are explicitly or implicitly instrumentally rational

⁵⁴ What I am suggesting is not a political-economic functionalist view of corruption. I do not mean to conceive of corruption in terms of its temporary function as the substitution of the backward formal institution design, which is constrained by specific historical periods as well as particular national conditions. Instead, I hypothesise that there is a causal relation between the routinization of corruption and certain general or universal principles of the functioning of society.

and oriented toward obtaining (not necessarily maximising, or rather, relatively maximising) certain utility (either various forms of social resource or the fulfilment of certain affectional needs). At the same time, the realisation of instrumental rationality must be based on compliance with another two levels of rationality: value rationality and rationalising oriented rationality – the tacit rationality.

The achievement of the goal of any social action fundamentally depends on its compliance with tacit rationality, and people realise this tacit reasoning process by acting out symbolic value-oriented actions. This is to say, social actions are value-related, or to a limited extent value-oriented, but the realising of value – whether people truly believe in it or not – is never the ultimate goal. Instead, to act out value-oriented behaviours finally serves two goals (a practical one and an abstract one): the fulfilment of utilitarian goals and the cooperative interaction among social members (the order of the society). There is no pure value-oriented action, and realising specific value itself is not a goal for its own sake. It is a tool – no matter whether the subject is consciously aware of this or not.

To conclude, it is not simply gaining certain concrete outcome but rather to gain the desired outcome in a legitimate or justifiable way that constitutes the real motivation driving social subjects' action. The compliance with tacit rationality towards a cooperative order of society is the premise for implementing the justification successfully. Value-based rational action serves as the medium between instrumental and tacit rationality, constituting a necessary procedure for the realisation of the former and the concrete embodiment of social actors' compliance with the latter. To some extent, value rationality is also the medium linking individual agency to collective development. Finally, we can attribute the survival of certain “backward” values to their function as the reference system for rationalising, and therefore corruption as one form of symbolic action that serves the achievement of a certain goal by social actor by means of expressing these values. In this sense, we arrive at an alternative explanation for the question why corruption appears to be unavoidable.

1.2 Applying Tacit Rationality to Explaining Corruption in China: An Alternative View of the Reinforcement of Informal Institutions, Cooperative Commitment and Transactional Corruption

The Changing Structure of Causes of Chinese Corruption and the Need to Re-examine the Explanatory Frame

Given the explosion of corruption that went hand in hand with China's reform and opening-up policy, corruption has become one of the most concerning issues among the public and within academia. A substantial body of research has proved that the pervasiveness of corrupt practices in China is directly or indirectly related to a series of political-economic institutions either not commensurate with or brought about by the reforms and development.

Correspondingly, most existing literature – either foreign or domestic – tends to probe the cause of Chinese corruption by paying special attention to the correlation between the changing political-economic structure and the scope, type, and level of corruption. Therefore, discussion around corruption has long been dominated by a normative old institutionalism paradigm which develops within the principal-agent model and a general theme of good governance.⁵⁶ Some studies attribute pervasive corruption to the unthorough nature of reform,⁵⁷ while some others concentrate on the reform-oriented institutional changes that are seen to have created new spaces of manipulation for corruption.⁵⁸ The range of exploration covers the system determining the income of public officials that may bring about a mentality of imbalance,⁵⁹ fiscal decentralisation,⁶⁰ the legacies of the planned economy typical of a dual-track price system,⁶¹ politicisation of bureaucracy,⁶² etc. Except for general political-economic institutions, the low quality of civil servants together with problematic cadre recruiting, educating and managing institutions⁶³ as well as the weak anti-corruption system⁶⁴ are also considered influential factors.

Conceiving the overall structure of political-economic literature about Chinese corruption, rent-seeking and game theory constitute the two most commonly used explanatory tools. Both

⁵⁶ According to the definition given by the ESCAP of United Nations (Original document see <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/good-governance.pdf>), “governance” means “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented).” The actors of governance include not only government officials but also NGOs, media, and members of corporations that together constitute civil society. Correspondingly, “good governance” refers to an ideal status of governance that is generally seen to have eight major characteristics: participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus oriented, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability. For representative research on exploring the potential of good governance frame in explaining corruption, see Rothstein and Teorell (2008; 2013; 2011; 2017; 2014)

⁵⁷ Manion (1996; 1997; 2004; 2016), He (2000), Oi (1989), Ostergaard (1986), Ostergaard and Petersen (1991), Myers (1989), and Lee (1990), etc.

⁵⁸ Sun (2004), Gong (1994; 1996; 1997), Levy (1995), and Kwong (1997), etc.

⁵⁹ Zou (2000) and Kwong (1997)

⁶⁰ Wu (2008) and Jin et al. (2005)

⁶¹ Li (2000), Wong (1992), Gong (1993), and Deng, Zhang and Leverentz (2010), etc.

⁶² Fan and Grossman (2001), Oi (1995; 1998), and Ren and Du (2008), etc.

⁶³ Sun (2012), Wedeman (2004), and Bergsten et al. (2008), etc.

⁶⁴ Guo (2014), Li and Deng (2016a; 2016b), and Myers (1989), etc.

of them are economic instruments that build upon assumptions of man's rationality as well as the earliest systematic theories introduced to China to analyse the cause of extensive corruption. The rent-seeking theory was founded on the works of Krueger, Bhagwati, and Buchanan. Rents are wealth that is generated from the government's explicit interference through actions asserting its privileged access to scarce resources. Rent-seeking specifically refers to business activities wherein the portion of distribution is expanded without creating new wealth. It is widely recognised that rent-seeking practices and corruption are intimately related because the competition over the rents among business people are highly likely to entail corruption, especially bribery.⁶⁵ These uncontrolled competitive activities are believed to be correlated with a dysfunction of governance, and following this line of thinking, advocates concentrate on the political-economic institutional structures related to the creation, competition and allocation of rents as well as the opportunities for corruption.

Many studies attribute the persistence and pervasiveness of corruption in China to the government's routinised overcontrol over economic activities and the lack of an institutional foundation that guarantees a free market.⁶⁶ As Tak-Wing Ngo has argued, "rent-creation and rent-seeking are difficult to eliminate because they have become institutionalised as the constitutive parts of economic governance" (2008, 27). Game theory also leads to a solution by relying on the adjustment of external constraints, while compared with rent-seeking theory which adopts a macro-level view, it looks at the pervasiveness of corruption from a micro-level perspective.⁶⁷ Game theory is particularly interested in how individuals make decisions to reach an optimal goal – maximising utility – while taking into consideration how the other agents will behave. The prisoner's dilemma is frequently cited as a means of understanding why people choose to be corrupt. To conclude, based on a variety of standards identifying high quality of governance and with an overwhelming focus on structural constraints, the normative institutional approach tacitly assumes that if we adjust the influential external conditions or replace the "backward" institutions with "advanced" ones, the situation of endemic corruption will cease.

⁶⁵ It should be noted that though rent-seeking and corruption are closely related and even regarded by some scholars as synonymous, they are still two things. Not all corrupt practice involves rent-seeking and, vice versa, not all rent-seeking indicates the existence of corruption. For a detailed illustration of the difference between corruption and rent-seeking practices, see Tak-Wing Ngo (2008).

⁶⁶ For representative works, see Aidt (2016), Ngo and Wu (2009), and Sands (1990).

⁶⁷ Song (2016), Wang and Zhang (2008), Verbeke and Kano (2013), Zhu (2012), Zhang et al. (2015).

However, the unexpected result brings about a challenge to the predominant political-economic research paradigm. In this way, the empirical puzzle confronting China also fits the general problem that perplexes corruption studies at large. After decades of reform, a profound improvement of institutions has taken place in China, covering almost all aspects of social life.⁶⁸ The structural factors that are supposed to hinder the battle against corruption have either been corrected or not longer exist. In particular, a comprehensive and forceful anti-corruption system has also come into being. Yet, the impression of the prevalence of corruption as perceived by Chinese people is that corruption is still pervasive and even seems to be growing.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, a variety of new features of corruption have emerged which generally are manifest in three trends as revealed by my fieldwork findings in China.

(1) The first trend concerns passive compliance to anti-corruption policies, which I summarise as the change from over-flexibility to lazy governance. As suggested by the popular notion that “those who do more are also more likely to get into trouble” (*nengganshi, yichushi*), many cadres choose to passively “comply” with laws and disciplines including anti-corruption policies. Part of the reason is that some cadres want to keep a low profile to prevent historical irregularities from being detected by the inspecting departments. But a more fundamental reason is that, for a very long time, cadres, especially those at the middle and low levels have managed their jobs in very flexible and instrumental ways that overwhelmingly emphasise the achievement of ends and pays little attention to the legitimacy of the means. As Li Kejun – a retired county party committee secretary – wrote in his book about administrative strategies of local cadres, “if we investigate county-level cadres’ behaviours strictly according to formally-coded textual rules, a large proportion of them will probably receive at least a serious warning under Party discipline or even punishment under criminal law” (K. Li 2015, 33). The confession of a corrupt cadre exemplifies this situation: “I knew it [participating in business dinners and interest exchanges] was not so appropriate, but I thought that breaking some Party discipline was only a trivial problem, as long as I did this also for a higher cause [to make a contribution to the development of the city].”

⁶⁸ Kilkon Ko and Cuifen Weng (2012) have given an integral and detailed illustration of institutional improvements in China.

⁶⁹ For more similar findings, see Wedeman (2006) and Guo (2008), etc. During my fieldwork in China, I became aware of an interesting saying popular among the public: “if we execute all cadres for being corrupt, then we might overdo it; but if we execute one of every two of them then there must be someone left.” I used to hear this saying ten years ago, while to my surprise it is still cited by people nowadays.

Consequently, when the Party demanded a profound transformation of working style, those cadres felt as if they were losing their work brief, while they did not believe in the validity of the formally prescribed working style.

(2) The second change is from inaction to overcorrection, which specifically concerns formalism and dogmatic implementation of anti-corruption regulations. A cadre who works in a local Party discipline inspecting section told me, “we used to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to corruption.” While after the on-going anti-corruption effort had started, many inspectors of discipline among cadres slipped into the other extreme, namely overcorrection. For example, when I did fieldwork in a small city in Northeast China, one local cadre mentioned to me his experience of the dogmatic implementation of policy. A newly enacted regulation aimed at restricting office space said that no person should have office space of more than nine square meters. There was a 30 square-meter large office with three people working in it, which meant that each of them got one square meter more, however, if they squeezed one more person into that room, it would then be too crowded. In spite of the practical dilemma, the ultimate goal of such regulation was to prevent public sectors from a luxury working style instead of giving everyone an exact space of nine square meters, so it was imagined that it would be fine to maintain the current situation. But the inspector insisted that the extra three square-meters should be eliminated, so people who worked there bought some potted plants to occupy the space. It seemed ironic that a regulation aiming at preventing waste eventually caused more waste. Such practices implied a lack of capacity for discerning the spirit of the law, which is essentially attributed to dependence on informal institutions. The fulfilment of all tasks used to be based on mobilisation through a complex network of informal modes while, correspondingly, the validity of these tasks was endorsed by personal authority instead of their own legitimacy.

(3) The last trend manifests itself as a change from unconsciousness to over-sensitivity. Closely related to the last two trends, many local cadres realised that if they kept their former working style, everything they did might be wrong. This mentality led to an over-sensitive mentality among the cadres and an over-politicisation of the on-going anti-corruption effort. Some cadres started to question its “real” purpose, taking anti-corruption to be a tool of political struggle. Both unconsciousness of the law and over-sensitivity prevented cadres from beginning to reflect on their own behaviour. Conversely, it gave rise to a mentality among the cadres that anti-corruption was something far away from them, and that it is “none of my

business but only about the power struggle among the big potatoes.” Therefore, like ordinary people, the cadres also enthusiastically gossiped about the corruption stories of others – be they their peers or superiors, but just not themselves – while they also did not take these stories seriously. Many of them did not really know or even care about why they should be aware of corruption. As for the anti-corruption policies, most cadres took them as part of bureaucratic procedures that were to be followed rather than inherent requirements of professional ethics.

How can we explain the dilemma that corruption still remains pervasive despite advances in the overall institutional environment as well as the new trends arising from that situation? Why does the development of economic freedom and quality of governance seem to have a very limited impact on taming the seemingly ubiquitous corruption? Is an imperfect formal institution the only reason for the pervasiveness of corruption? Is the reform context still the key motivation driving corruption in recent times? Do existing theoretical frames remain sufficient to explain corruption in China in a new era marked by profound institutional development?

With regards to these questions, it might be helpful to first conceive of the advantages and disadvantages of the dominant research approach taken towards Chinese corruption. Corruption occurs for many reasons and for most of time different influential factors are intertwined. But generally, corruption depends on two conditions: the presence of opportunity, namely loopholes in an institutional design, and the presence of subjective motivation which specifically refers to the confusion or ambiguity generated in relation to moral orientations. The classic political-economic paradigm provides a powerful form of explanation regarding the first condition while leaving the second relatively overlooked. It helps to reveal the weakness of external constraints but fails to explain why sometimes state-enacted formal institutions are not implemented well. A rule becomes a rule only when it is respected, not to mention that no institution is perfect. In brief, traditional approaches only examine the necessary conditions but not the conditions that are sufficient for the realisation of corrupt practices. It is very important for us to understand the former, but it is not enough to focus only on objective factors.

During the early stage of China’s reforms, institutional backwardness constituted the major cause of the explosion of corruption, and this situation made the normative institutional

perspective persuasive enough in certain historical periods. However, that subjective motivation was not regarded as the major factor or the most urgent issue did not mean that it did not exist. Indeed, as the reforms went deeper and more institutional improvements were carried out, a structural change in the cause of the pervasiveness of corruption also took place in China. And such change is reflected in a decrease of administrative process related corruption and an increase in transactional types of corruption (bribery) (Ko and Weng 2012).⁷⁰ Accordingly, the traditional political-economic paradigm seems to have lost its explanatory capacity in recent times due to its lack of attention to subjective agency. And the structural change in the causes of Chinese corruption makes internal motivation more prominent, which also makes the traditional approaches focused exclusively on external factors less efficient and the research on internal factors more urgent.

Applying Tacit Rationality to Explaining Corruption in China

Given the changing structure of the cause of corruption in China, what is still needed is a framework systematically addressing subjective motivation rather than objective conditions. As Hsu and Smart (2013, 179) indicated, it is about “the crucial skills involved in knowing when rules should not be followed, or when it is safe to break them.” With a growing number of studies revealing the fact that corrupt practices involving two-way exchanges between officials and citizens occupy the overwhelming majority of the recorded cases, some scholars set out to investigate the role of corruption from a social interaction perspective and focus specifically on transactional corruption in non-economic realms. This is where lies the empirical implication of tacit rationality. Applying the thesis of tacit rationality to studying cadre corruption in China, the analysis of this research focuses on how local CPC cadres interact with each other within the realm of officialdom as well as with ordinary people from other walks of life to maintain the functioning of state authority and their own personal development. Based on comprehending the function of certain informal operating patterns in maintaining the cooperative interaction regarding their compliance with tacit rationalising-

⁷⁰ Based on their empirical findings indicating such a trend, Kilko Ko and Cuifen Weng suggest that since the 1990s, “Chinese corruption has made a transition from being an administrative issue to being a private-public transactional problem.” Andrew Wedeman (2018) has analysed the nature of corruption in China. Referring to numbers of reports about corruption cases in China between 1995 and 2017, he noted that 74 percent of corrupt practices involve transactions, manifested in the form of bribery, and the other cases involve embezzlement. Wedeman’s purpose of referring to this data was to examine whether corruption in China fits the kleptocratic model – and his conclusion was that corruption in China leans towards but does not fully match kleptocracy.

oriented rationality, we are enabled to answer why these informal institutions that share the same structure with the transaction-form of corruption appear to be “unavoidable.”

It is a well established recognition that cadre corruption in China is closely related to a complex of informal operative patterns centering around the establishment and sustaining of a personal network. But there is still no frame addressing the source of their effectiveness. By initiating the on-going anti-corruption effort, the ultimate goal of the CPC is to replace informal operative patterns with formally-coded institutions. But the internalisation of an institution ultimately depends on consensus, and to understand the mechanism behind the construction of this consensus entails a frame that explains the source of the effectiveness of an institution. With the absence of such a frame, implementing the formal rules and disciplines by coercion could lead to remarkable short-term achievements that do little to solve the fundamental problem. Moreover, following a rule without recognising its effectiveness but out of fear or calculation could give rise to side-effects. If we cannot explain why cadres’ daily practice depends on informal patterns, the aimlessness of the reform will finally lead to a situation in which, on the one hand, the informal patterns are effective but forbidden, while on the other hand, the formal institutions are enforced while ineffective. Consequently, a vacuum of norms arises and causes confusion and panic among cadres.

Tacit rationality provides a framework that can situate different attributes entailed by the multifaceted social status of the CCP cadre group in an integral frame. It provides an alternative explanation for the ineffectiveness of formal constraints and the constant reinforcement of informal institutions by analysing why informal institutions possess more capacity to express the ideal values expected by different roles, namely how they serve the smooth-running of cooperative social interaction better than the formal institutions. I argue that superficially, some informal patterns of behaviour are continually inherited and reinforced because they are more valid in helping people achieve interests, but in essence, they can dominate people’s behaviour because they are in accordance with tacit rationalising-oriented rationality, and this is also the fundamental premise that endorses the validity of formal institutions in achieving goals. Thus, what makes the informal patterns more effective is not a form that is supposed to be culturally dominated for its own sake, but the adaption of such a form to the context.

Therefore, underlying the routinisation of corruption in China lies a question of why a series of informal patterns of practice possessing a structure similar to corruption functions more effectively in promoting the creation of cooperative commitment and therefore in maintaining a balanced social order than the formally prescribed institutions do. Tacit rationality offers an alternative to the disadvantage of the normative view that dominates the literature. The normative view develops its theories by focusing exclusively on one aspect of public officers' subjective attributes entailed by their role as the agents authorised with public power, but to a large extent ignores another aspect, that is, their role as elements of the principals as well. Correspondingly, this perspective pays overwhelming attention to corruption in political-economic activities but overlooks corruption in non-economic activities not purely driven by the calculation of utility. In other words, it tends to take corruption as merely actions against certain norms while ignoring the fact that corruption, especially transaction-form corruption also constitutes one type of social exchange practice.⁷¹

All individuals act within the social fabric constituted by various relationships; cadres are no exception. PRC's unique political institution endows the CPC cadres with multiple roles: as elements of the party-state authority, participants in economic activities on behalf of the government, and as members of families and groups. Each role claims certain values and obligations defined by a specific idealised view. As elements of the state authority, the cadres are supposed to behave impartially according to universalistic norms, i.e. formally-coded laws and regulations enacted by the government and the party. As participants of economic activities, the cadres have to follow market law with efficiency as the top concern. While as members of families and groups, the cadres, like everybody else, behave under the guidance of emotion and particularistic norms that facilitate personal preferences. However, there are always tensions between the expectations claimed by different roles, which are generally manifest in two aspects. Firstly, the tension between official and social roles. As members of groups and families, cadres are also influenced by cultural-traditional factors, this means that to either maintain a good relationship with friends and family or to successfully fulfil their job (promoting economic development and mobilising the people) requires some tricks which are also called *jianghu* wisdom by Chinese people. They are effective when used in private life

⁷¹ As Lü (2000) reviewed the disadvantage of normative approaches, "that is also the very reason why this approach is so fruitful: it latches precisely onto cases in which incentives override public norms."

but probably illicit according to official rules. Secondly, the tension between economic and political roles. As participants of economic activities, cadres need to take economic growth as a priority; however, at the same time, they are not solely meant to run after profit, neither in terms of public obligations nor in pursuit of individual interests as the state also demands them to consider social equity and to be self-sacrificing in their actions. Confronting these tensions, an arbitrary compliance with any single idealised view and institution would probably lead to the violation of another. As revealed by my fieldwork, debates about corruption and anti-corruption in China always centre around one question: how is it possible for CPC cadres to fulfil their tasks in legitimate ways in the sense of complying both with the holistic aims of sustainable development and the value orientation of the party-state, and at the same time remain in harmony with their own interests and sense of fulfilment? A series of informal institutions help cadres totalise different obligations directed by tacit rationality. These institutions are also where corrupt exchanges become embedded. By partly fulfilling all expectations claimed by different roles, they also sacrifice part of the principle advocated by each role.

To illustrate the functioning of tacit rationality, I propose to deconstruct informal institutions – a complex of repeatedly enacted and consolidated ritualised exchange practices – into a complex of systematically organised verbal and non-verbal symbolic actions. I hypothesise that the informal corruption-inclusive patterns of behaving constantly are reinforced because they are more effective in creating and maintaining commitment and cooperative interaction among the members of social groups. The source of their effectiveness rests on their acting in accordance with the tacit rationality-oriented reasoning which fundamentally dominates people’s decision-making. And such an accordance is specifically embodied as their capacity to totalise different roles endowed by the CPC cadres’ unique social status. Specifically, with their high capacity for expressing multiple values claimed by different roles, namely by creating the impression that all idealised common values are being considered and realised, informal institutions are capable of creating a consensus about a situation as the premise for the establishment of commitment based on a process of multifaceted rationalisation.

As for corruption – here mainly the transactional form of corruption, I take it as one type of exchange specifically involved with entrusted official power. Referring to the data collected from participant observation, I argue that corruption appears to be “unavoidable” because it shares similar logical and operative procedures with licit exchanges as an extricable part of

the practice of *Guanxi*-building. Thus, normal socialising practice and corruption are both, in essence, the tool for establishing or the credential for entering into a cooperative network. During the process of nurturing a commitment, the crucial point is not the nature of the exchange, namely whether the objects or the channels are legitimate or not, but the necessity of the exchange per se as a ritual action, as its symbolic meaning constitutes the foundation of mutual understanding and cooperation. In this sense, licit and illicit exchanges are inherently inseparable. Complying with certain informal procedures may not immediately entail the participation of a corrupt transaction but rather implies a tacit consent to take part in such practices when necessary, as it is part of the obligation. Conversely, if someone wants to avoid potentially becoming corrupt, the only way is to avoid obeying informal institutions including normal social exchanges – for these manifest the same structure as corruption – and consequently in doing so lose the opportunity of cooperating with the other people. In short, accepting the risk of involvement in potentially corrupt exchanges constitutes the auxiliary condition of gaining access to the cooperative network.

1.3 Methodological Approach: Critical Discourse Analysis

The Relevance of CDA

The analysis of this research has two objectives: identifying corruption-inclusive informal institutions and examining to what extent and how they serve to convey and maintain common values claimed by the roles of the social subject. Institutions are in themselves patterns of verbal and nonverbal symbolic acts, and the analysis of their relationship with the underlying values entails a dialectic perceiving frame. Therefore, I adopt Fairclough's three-stage version of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the general methodology and Machin and Mayr's (2012) toolkit for applying CDA as the concrete techniques of analysis.

CDA fundamentally founds itself upon two principles which make it specifically relevant to this study. One is a view of semiosis "as an irreducible element of all material social processes" (Williams 1977). Referred to as a concept synonymous with semiosis, discourse, in view of CDA, not only includes text but also "visual images and sound in complex and sophisticated ways" (Fairclough et al. 2004). Moreover, practitioners regard discourse as not just the reflection of reality and what people know about it but rather as part of reality and the process of knowing itself. By assuming that "it is through language that we constitute the social world [...] how we talk about the world influences the society we created, the

knowledge we celebrate and despise, and the institutions we build” (Machin and Mayr 2012, 21), they conceptualise discourse as not only meaning-making itself but meaning-making in context, part of the social structure within which it is generated (Fairclough 2015, 8).

Another principle of CDA is a dialectical view of reasoning. All discourse contains value judgement.⁷² In essence, CDA is a method of critical thinking based on identifying and questioning the common values and knowledge (or assumptions) behind any discourse. CDA aims at a “critique of the existing society which can provide sound reasons for action to change it” (Fairclough 2015, 15–16). Being critical does not mean to criticise falsity within a discourse or the “wrong thoughts” behind it or finally to find out how discourse and thought are distorted or manipulated. Instead, it means looking for explanations. As Fairclough indicated, “explanation” in CDA has a unique meaning. CDA seeks to explain not just “what happened on a particular occasion in a particular event” but also the dialectical relationship between discourse and other social elements which are “drawn upon on many occasions and in many events” (Fairclough 2015, 7 11). In short, CDA takes the analysis of who says what to whom, where, when, why and for what purpose as an entry into a general critique of the social structure. The explanatory critique distinguishes Fairclough’s CDA “from other forms of (critical) analysis, including other versions of CDA [is that,][...] [it] is not, as one might assume, just a critique of discourse, it is a critique of the existing social reality (including its discourse) which begins with a critique of discourse” (Fairclough 2015, 6 7). It is also in this view that CDA echoes the theoretical basis of this study – a relationist view of reality and social action. As Mannheim contended, we should switch our attention from making judgments about the content of thought and action to examining the social and historical context that make it possible for people to think and act as they do. CDA is concerned with why discourse is produced in certain forms rather than in objectivity itself.

The General Frame and Concrete Techniques of Doing CDA

⁷² Even if the communicator does not realise this fact or denies it. For the former indicates a situation when the value conveyed by the discourse is deep-internalised so that it becomes part of common sense and which is taken for granted without thinking; while the denial itself in the latter situation also implies a value orientation.

The three-stage CDA includes a normative critique on discourse, an explanatory critique, and finally an argument for certain transformative actions.⁷³ The analysis in this study mainly concentrates on the first two stages, while the table below offers a brief overview of Fairclough’s model.

Stage of CDA		Object of Critique
Normative Critique	Description and Interpretation	Discourse
Explanatory Critique	Explanation	
Action	Arguing for transformative activity	Existing social condition

Fairclough’s three-stage model of doing CDA Fairclough (2015)

The three concrete stages of critique analysis – description, interpretation, and explanation – do not have to be linear, for, as Janks (1997, 329) interprets, “[i]t does not matter which kind of analysis one begins with, as long as they are all included and are shown to be mutually explanatory. It is in the interconnections that the analyst finds interesting patterns and disjunctions that need to be described, interpreted and explained.” At the stage of normative critique, CDA aims at discovering patterns, especially contradictions within discourse as well as between discourse and action. Then, based on a normative critique, CDA explains the patterns by analysing the dialectical relationship between discourse and the other social elements and ultimately argues for certain changes in the existing social reality, namely “transformative action.”

The concrete analysis of all stages is guided by one principal idea: all discourse represents pre-posed values which are specifically manifest in the subject’s preference of choosing semiosis. This means if one prefers one word over another during the communication, by delving into the connotation of the two words as well as the background generating them, we can determine which value the subject advocates. Centering around this idea, Machin and Mayr (2012) have summarised a series of techniques that help detecting patterns and reveal

⁷³ As indicated by Fairclough (2015), there is no direct connection between CDA and the realisation of transformative social action, but what CDA can do to promote the change of existing reality is argue for it by conducting a dialogue between the analysts and the relevant participants of certain social activities.

values behind discourse as the concrete toolkit of doing CDA. The following table gives a neat outline of these techniques.

Aspects of analysing	Text		Non-text semiosis
Analysing semiotic choices: Words and images	Word connotations	Overlexicalisation	Visual semiotic choices (iconography, attributes, settings, salience)
	Lexical choices and genre of communication		
	Suppression or lexical absence	Structural oppositions	
Presenting speech and speakers: Quoting verbally	Quoting verbally		Attitude through visual semiotic resources
Representing people: Language and identity	Representational strategies in language		Representational strategies in visual communication
	Classification of social actors		
	Individualisation versus collectivisation		
Representing action: Transitivity and verb processes	Material/mental/behavioral/verbal/relational/ existential processes		Visual representation of transitivity
	Adjuncts		
	Grammatical positioning of actions		
	Actions that are represented in abstraction		
Concealing and taking for granted: Nominalisation and presupposition	Nominalisation and its effects		
	Presupposition		
Persuading with abstraction: Rhetoric and metaphor	Metaphor domains		
	Rhetorical tropes (metaphor, hyperbole, personification/objectification, metonymy, synecdoche)		
	Metaphor signaling		
Committing and evading: Truth, modality and hedging	Modality in language		Modality and certainty in visual communication
	Modals and authority		
	Hedging		Markers of visual modality

Machin and Mayr's toolkit of doing CDA Machin and Mayr (2012)

Applying CDA to this Research Project

Specifically, CDA supports my analysis in two aspects.

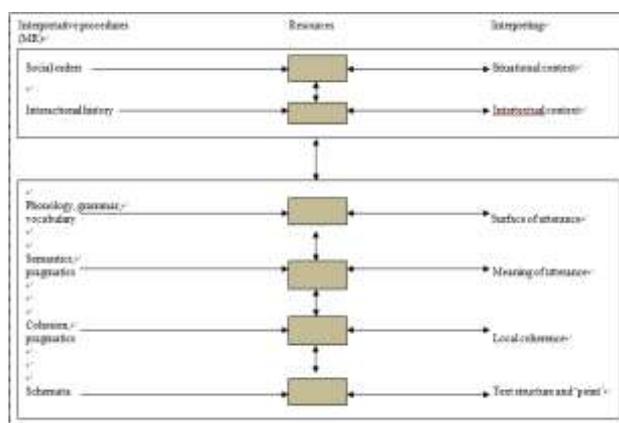
Identifying interesting patterns and raising a hypothesis

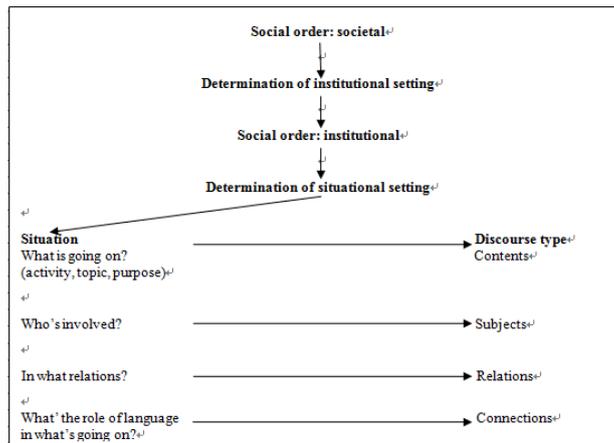
During fieldwork and data coding, CDA helps to identify patterns and conduct the descriptive analysis, which pertains to the stage of normative critique. Based on this, I develop my theoretical framework and establish the hypothesis. The object of analysis in this period is discourse itself. The task of this stage encompasses two parts: Description and interpretation. The description part refers to an examination of three types of value that formal features may have: experiential value (text producers’ experience or knowledge about the world); relational value (social relations enacted in the discourse); expressive value (producers’ evaluation).

Dimensions of meaning	Values of features	Structural effects
Contents	Experiential	Knowledge/ beliefs
Relations	Relational	Social relations
Subjects	Expressive	Social identities

Formal features: experiential, relational and expressive values Fairclough (2015, 131)

If the description concerns the activities of text-producers, then the interpretation procedure concerns those of text-interpreters, namely the reproduction and interpretation (recontextualization) of the text. An important concept involved in this procedure is MR (member resources), which according to Fairclough’s definition refers to the repertoire of knowledge, especially those “implicit assumptions” drawn upon by the interpreters during their interpreting. The procedure of interpretation encompasses six domains ranging from the surface of utterance, the meaning of utterance, local coherence, text structure and point, to situational context and intertextual context.

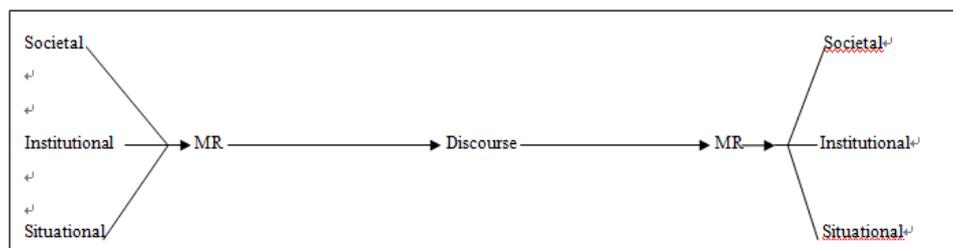




Interpretation (Fairclough 2015, 156)

Analysing the social determination of patterns and further verifying the hypothesis

At the analysis stage I adopt CDA to explain how certain informal institutions serve to totalise different values and to detect further evidence to support my hypothesis. The major task in this stage is explanation (explanatory critique). The objective of the critique shifts to focus on the existing social reality, namely to “portray a discourse as part of a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures and what reproductive effects discourse can cumulatively have on those structures, sustaining them or changing them” (Fairclough 2015, 172).



Explanation (Fairclough 2015, 173)

The Time Frame: Corruption and Anti-corruption in China since the 18th NCPCC

This dissertation focuses on corruption in China, specifically within a timeframe since the 18th CPC National Congress. After Xi Jinping took over the position of the president of the PRC and became the top leader of the CPC, a new round of anti-corruption efforts was launched. What makes the on-going anti-corruption effort of great research significance is that it manifests a feature of both old and new. It is old because it could be seen as nothing but a successional part of the ever-lasting self-purification of the CPC since its founding. It is new

because it appears to be more serious and fruitful than ever before, which specifically manifests itself in the breaking of many taboos, the enacting of a series of new laws and regulations, and the reinforced and non-selective implementing of anti-corruption policies.

It could be said that, on the one hand, the most explicit goal of the ongoing anti-corruption effort is to contain corrupt practices pervasive among the cadre group, while on the other hand, the anti-corruption effort also plays a role as a catalyst that makes some inherent tension within the social system more prominent. As repeatedly indicated by the top leaders of the CPC, anti-corruption aims to address both symptoms and root causes, which is to say, CPC takes the anti-corruption effort as the breakthrough step of strengthening its governing capacity and reestablishing the desired political environment. In short, the anti-corruption effort launched since the 18th CPC National Congress constitutes a significant part of a larger plan, that is, to comprehensively deepen the reforms, and of which endows significance to the study of corruption and the ongoing anti-corruption policies.

The Scope of the Target Group: County-Level CPC Cadres

Who are the cadres?

The scope of a cadre is often misunderstood in China. According to the Baidu Encyclopedia,⁷⁴ Cadre (*ganbu*) was originally a Japanese term and first introduced to China during the Republican period. This term refers to people who bear certain leading functions in the country. In contemporary understanding there are three categories regarding the scope and nature of cadres. The broadest and probably also the most pervasive and folklore category in society is to regard all people who occupy an authorised permanent position (*bianzhi*) in public sectors – namely public officials – as cadres. This notion might derive from the fact that the wages and benefits of public officials come from state finance expenditure. In the official discourse, the scope of cadre is narrower, referring only to those officials in certain leading positions within the authoritative system and who are usually called leading cadres (*lingdao ganbu*), not just cadres (*ganbu*). But sometimes these two terms are used interchangeably within the official discourse. It needs to be noted that a cadre group is not exclusively made up of CPC members as people without CPC membership can also be

⁷⁴ Links of Cadre (*Gan Bu* 干部) in Baidu Encyclopedia:
<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%B9%B2%E9%83%A8/2693?fr=aladdin>

appointed as leading cadres,⁷⁵ just as, as a tacit principle, non-CPC-member cadres (*feidangyuan ganbu*) are in most cases assigned deputy positions.

The narrowest understanding of the cadre group, which is also the one adopted in anti-corruption discourse as well as in this study restricts the scope of a cadre to only include CPC-members who possess certain levels among leading positions in the party organs, government, state-owned enterprises and public institutions. More specifically, they are called CPC-member leading cadres (*dangyuan lingdao ganbu*). Xi Jinping identifies this group as “the key few” (*guanjian shaoshu*), meaning the most important force in the party. According to the interpretation of the office of law and regulation of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission,⁷⁶ the CPC-member leading cadre (*dangyuan lingdao ganbu*) includes:

Cadres from “Party and government offices”: CPC members occupying leadership positions or non-leadership positions above Associate Consultant level (rank 8) in Organs of the CPC, the NPC, Administration, CPPCC, Judicial, Prosecution, Democratic parties, the Industry and Commerce Association (C of C), and other social institutions administrated referring to the civil service law;

Cadres from “State-owned enterprises”: CPC members occupying leadership positions above middle-level in large and mega state-controlled enterprises, the whole leading group of middle-size enterprises state-controlled enterprises, and all the other party members with the level (or equivalent to the level) of and above the county level (level 8) in these enterprises;

Cadres from all “Public institutions (including those uncatalogued into the jurisdictional reach of civil service law)”: CPC members in the leadership group and the other cadres with administrative positions above level 6.

County-level CPC cadres: the “key of the key few.”

This study pays special attention to the county-level CPC cadres ranked from 5 to 10 (including *tingju*, *xianchu*, and *xiangke* level), not only because they are the majority constituent body of the cadre group and therefore at the same time the main target criticised for corruption, but because, more importantly, county-level cadres function as mediators between the party-state and the people. As Heberer and Schubert (2012, 222) stated, “[a]ll central policies eventually have to be carried out by county and township governments, and the cadre bureaucracies at these administrative levels are decisive for the success of any

⁷⁵ See “The Regulations on the selection and appointment of leading party and government cadres (党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例)” Article 4: “ The selection and appointment of non-CPC member cadres ... refer to these regulations for implementation. (选拔任用非中共党员领导干部。。。参照本条例执行).” <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/16/20020723/782504.html>

⁷⁶ Original announcement see weblink: <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/1126/c1001-27858472.html>

reform initiative passed down by the central state.” Moreover, regarding the intermeshing of political, bureaucratic and economic power within the state authority system of China, CPC cadres simultaneously play multiple roles as members of a political party, participants of economic activities, and members of groups and families. How they manage their daily performance confronting intersecting goals and institutions constitutes the core concern of this research as the cadres’ mode of behaviour directly relates to the degree and scope of corruption.

PRC’s Political Institution and Corruption: Intermeshed Political and Bureaucratic Power⁷⁷

The essential feature of the PRC’s political institution is the intermeshing of political and bureaucratic power. The top leaders of the CPC have repeatedly emphasised in all historical periods that “the Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavour in every part of the country.”⁷⁸ The CPC takes this principle as the fundamental guarantee of political stability and economic development⁷⁹ and it is also written into the state constitution⁸⁰ and CPC’s party constitution.⁸¹ Not just the party and government organs, but all public institutions and residents’ committees (*juweihui*) must also establish party branches (*dangzhibu*) which are responsible for day-to-day coordination – especially for propagating the policies of the party. Therefore, studies about corruption in China should consider two aspects as follows.

⁷⁷ Lü (2000) has well elucidated the intermeshing of political and bureaucratic power in his book about cadre corruption in China.

⁷⁸ For the most recent and systematic use of this principle see Xi Jinping’s report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China October 18, 2017. “坚持党对一切工作的领导” Official translation see Website of “Central Compilation & Translation Bureau”. <http://book.theorychina.org/upload/2017-19D-EN-1/>

⁷⁹ Zhao Gangyin has effectively presented a retrospective of the historical evolution of the idea that “the Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country” in his article “‘党领导一切’是怎么来的.” More details refer to the link of the article: <http://www.zgdsw.org.cn/n1/2017/1127/c218998-29669825.html>

⁸⁰ “中国共产党领导是中国特色社会主义最本质的特征。”Original text see Constitution of the PRC (中华人民共和国宪法) http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/22/c_1122572202_3.htm

⁸¹ “中国共产党的领导是中国特色社会主义最本质的特征，是中国特色社会主义制度的最大优势。党政军民学，东西南北中，党是领导一切的。” Original text see Constitution of the Communist Party of China (中国共产党章程) http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/28/c_1121870794.htm

First, it is not meaningful to distinguish CPC members from public officials, for “the distinction between political corruption and bureaucratic corruption⁸² [...] bears little conceptual meaning” for the situation in China (Lü 2000, 5). The CPC cadres constitute the overwhelming majority of both rule-makers and rule-enforcers.⁸³ This guarantees that the party’s doctrines penetrate every aspect of grassroots life through a series of institutions – people’s congresses, administrative organs, the military commission, court and procuratorate organs, as well as the newly established supervision commission co-located with the discipline inspection commission of the CPC.⁸⁴ Put simply, there are no politically neutral cadres in China. The general principle of PRC Civil Servant Law stipulates that “the civil servant institution takes Marxism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Three Representatives as its guidance [...] carries out the lines and strategies of the CPC, insists on the principle of placing cadres under the supervision of the CPC.”⁸⁵ This means that for non-CPC-member cadres, advocating the rule of the CPC is also a premise for holding positions and an obligation. Even for CPC members occupying no leading positions and

⁸² Menocal et al (2015, 12) offers a good definition of political corruption and bureaucratic corruption: “[P]olitical corruption takes place at the highest levels of political authority. [...] It involves politicians, government ministers, senior civil servants and other elected, nominated or appointed senior public office holders. Political corruption is the abuse of office by those who decide on laws and regulations and the basic allocation of resources in a society (i.e. those who make the “rules of the game”). Political corruption may include tailoring laws and regulations to the advantage of private sector agents in exchange for bribes, granting large public contracts to specific firms or embezzling funds from the treasury. The term “grand corruption” is often used to describe such acts, reflecting the scale of corruption and the considerable sums of money involved. [...] Bureaucratic corruption occurs during the implementation of public policies. It involves appointed bureaucrats and public administration staff at the central or local level. It entails corrupt acts among those who implement the rules designed or introduced by top officials. Corruption may include transactions between bureaucrats and with private agents (e.g. contracted service providers). Such agents may demand extra payment for the provision of government services; make speed money payments to expedite bureaucratic procedures; or pay bribes to allow actions that violate rules and regulations. Corruption also includes interactions within the public bureaucracy, such as the payment or taking of bribes or kickbacks to obtain posts or secure promotion, or the mutual exchange of favours. This type of corruption is often referred to as “petty corruption,” reflecting the small payments often involved – although in aggregate the sums may be large.”

⁸³ As Lü (2000, 5) further indicated, “in this sense, the concepts of ‘electoral corruption,’ ‘administrative corruption,’ or even ‘political corruption (in its narrow sense)’ that are common in the Western literature [...] lack relevance to Communist politics.”

⁸⁴ If we go through the recruit brochure of either national or local public servant entrance examination, we could notice that the overwhelming majority of the positions and almost all vital positions are open to only CPC members. There are also non-party members working in public sectors, but usually they will not be assigned the position as “the number one leader 一把手,” at most a deputy leader position. For example, a non-CPC member deputy leader of one local public office told me that he was not qualified to preside over the regular working meeting when the number one person was absent, even though he was the second top leader.

⁸⁵ See Article 4 in the PRC Civil Servant Law: 第四条 公务员制度坚持以马克思列宁主义、毛泽东思想、邓小平理论和“三个代表”重要思想为指导，贯彻社会主义初级阶段的基本路线，贯彻中国共产党的干部路线和方针，坚持党管干部原则。

working in non-public sectors, the party constitution also demands that they play a leading role in all walks of life, especially in the sense of maintaining the authority of the party and carrying out the party's policies. Essentially, different levels of CPC members – especially cadres – constitute not only the state administrative system but all authority levels of the regime.

Second, related to the last point, since the cadres not only constitute elements of a political party but also the administrative authority of the country, the CPC adopts a very broad definition of corruption and deems it to be an issue of life and death.⁸⁶ Official statements often refer to corruption as not only practices that violate relevant articles of state criminal law, but also behaviour that betrays or deviates from the party tenet (the party's guidelines, disciplines, and policies), two types of practice that are often intertwined. He Zengke (2000, 244) has illustrated the scope, form and character of corruption in China, as “corruption in today's China is often linked with negative phenomena and unhealthy tendencies within the party and government departments. As a result, the anti-corruption efforts also include a fight against all of these phenomena and forms of behaviour.” Correspondingly, since the founding of the CPC, the anti-corruption effort is always endowed with the mission of the party's self-purification and conducted in the name of the rectification movement (*zhengfeng yundong*).

Methods of Data Collecting

Semi-structured interview

The data used in this research is collected mainly through semi-structured interviews, some from narrative and focused interviews interspersed with individual in-depth interviews. Considering that corruption is a rather sensitive topic, I tried to create “an openly designed” environment for my interviews with the expectation that “the interviewed subjects’ viewpoints are more likely to be expressed” in such situation than in a “standardized interview or a questionnaire” (Flick 2014, 150). I formally interviewed about 30 cadres ranking from *tingju* (5-6) level to *xianchu* (7-8) level and talked with many people from other walks of life during my fieldwork in China from October 2016 to May 2017. The interviews unfolded centering around three main topics: how people define corruption, their opinions about the root of corruption, and what they think of the ongoing anti-corruption effort, in

⁸⁶ “生死存亡的问题” This saying is frequently cited in CPC leaders' speeches and official documents.

particular how cadres comment on their peers sentenced for corruption. To reach a more comprehensive understanding of their answers, I also talked with my interviewees about concrete obligations and difficulties of their work, their families, anxieties and concerns, as well as their opinions about high-profile political figures and social issues. To conduct my interviews in a less obtrusive way, I usually started with a vignette taken from a TV drama or novel, asking interviewees about their opinion, or gradually broadened the topic by talking about the official anti-corruption propaganda documentary films. By discussing other people's experiences, I was able to gather my interviewees' opinions without making them feel stressed.

Participant observation

Participant observation is another important method of collecting data for this study.

Generally speaking, interviews informed me of the standardised or idealised ways cadres should talk and behave, while the participant observation enabled me to get a glance of the more authentic thoughts of cadres and how they actually act out the formally prescribed demands in their daily routines. Inspired by “invisible observation” – a sociolinguistics method – proposed by Zhu Wanjin (W. Zhu 1992), I spent a lot of time participating in various kinds of activities, including constructive drinking among cadres, half-casual meetings held within local public sectors, attending lectures about party construction and professional ethics given by professors from Party Schools, as well as activities held by residents' community party branches. Taking part in daily interactions with the cadres was an extremely precious experience that provided me the opportunity to observe and practice from the perspective of an insider.

By following a principle of “listening more, talking less,” I did not intentionally lead the topic towards corruption; instead, I tried to raise follow-up questions whenever people by their own initiative mentioned some key terms. By paying attention to how people talk about corruption under natural conditions, I was informed not only of what the CPC and ordinary people expect from cadres and how cadres discern their situation but also how cadres interact with each other within the realm of officialdom and how they keep contact with people. Moreover, by making contact and establishing connections with my interviewees, I was able to access first-hand data about how insiders conduct themselves and how the network works within officialdom.

Other sources of data

Except for interview and participant observation, I have also drawn background information and corruption cases from: important treatises and speeches by top CPC leaders;⁸⁷ newspapers⁸⁸ and periodicals; government working reports; official websites of the CPC, the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate as well as the CPC Central Discipline Inspecting Committee and the National Supervisory Commission. Another important source is a series of official anti-corruption propaganda documentary films.⁸⁹ Though I did not have a chance to interview any cadre who was serving a sentence, the cases exposed in these films offered me plenty of material which helped me identify some generalities relating to corrupt cadres' career trajectories. To reach more intuitive understanding of corruption, I also went through many relevant memoirs, reportages, documentary literature and biographical literature. What presented itself as most noteworthy is a book titled "The administrative strategies of county Party secretaries" written by a retired county secretary, Li Kejun. In the form of field-work report, the author depicts the living and working situation of local grass-root level cadres. Finally, as a complementary approach, I also tried to broaden my range of information by chatting with people from all walks of life (like taxi drivers, restaurant owners, private entrepreneurs, bank clerks, etc.) and browsing netizens' comments under corruption-relevant topics on Weibo, Wechat, and Baidu Post Bar.

Fieldwork Locations: City Group in Central Liaoning Province and Chongqing Municipality

I chose Central Liaoning City group and Chongqing municipality as fieldwork sites. The customs and lifestyles are explicitly different in these two areas. Concerning the mode of development, respectively they represent old- and new-style cities of China. Central Liaoning cities present a series of conservative features, while as the newest municipality of China, Chongqing showed more openness and creativity than the old industrial cities in the northeast.

⁸⁷ Website of Xi Jinping's treatises and speeches (习近平活动报道专页

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/xijiping/index.html>)

⁸⁸ People's Daily, Qiu Shi, Discipline Inspection and Supervision Report, South China Morning Post, and BBC, etc.

⁸⁹ "Always on the Road (永远在路上 *yongyuanzailushang*)"; "Enforcing Strict Discipline within the Party Organisation (打铁还需自身硬 *datie haixu yishenyi*); "The Sword of Inspecting Tour (巡视利剑 *xunshi lijian*)," "The Red Wanted-List (红色通缉 *hongse tongji*)."

However, in spite of the multifarious differences, these two cities both witnessed ideal-type corruption cases. Liaoning is always criticised for having a “tradition” of corruption, a negative impression reinforced following the explosion of an election bribery case in 2016. As for Chongqing, since the case of Wen Qiang (the former deputy director of the Chongqing Public Security Bureau), this city has been a focal point for the whole country, and where Bo Xilai became another high-level administrative cadre of Chongqing sentenced for corruption. By comparing the mode of behaviour among cadres in these two areas, I aim to underpin the general dynamics revealed through my observations.

Chapter 2 Perceiving the Idealised Values Associated with CPC Cadres' Multiple Roles through a Critical Examination of Official and Unofficial Discourses about Corruption

This chapter focuses on three idealised values that respectively dominate different roles in a middle-low level CPC cadre group. By critically examining the formal articulation and competing discourse around corruption, I focus on identifying unquestioned values and illustrating their connotations. Determined by their unique social status, CPC cadres are simultaneously elements of a ruling political party, members of families and circles of friends, as well as participants in economic activities. The aim of this chapter is to showcase the mainstream and thus commonly accepted values as the idealised views toward these roles. In essence, these values constitute a part of common sense, non-justified knowledge and beliefs – that dominate different dimensions of social life.

Referring to the state of Gomez and Jones (2000, 699), these unquestioned values could be seen as rational voids which rest “less on the content of systems of justification than on their nature.” Some idealised views are naturally attributed with validity by people through constant practice, while others are artificially assigned such status through official channels to avoid uncertainty, but the existence of all idealised views serves one aim, that is, to regulate social relations so as to put an end to endless doubt and cross-justification. In short, the significance of idealised values lay not in the substantial meaning they denote but in their existence per se, which serves to facilitate the smooth-running of cooperative interaction among social members. By invoking them, people are able to reduce uncertainty and transactional-costs so as to create a foundation for reciprocal interaction. From a dramaturgical point of view, these taken-for-granted values can also be seen as the scripts or the idealised characters that the performers are obliged to produce in terms of their role on the stage.⁹⁰ Therefore, before proceeding to look at how corruption-inclusive informal

⁹⁰ The fine quality or impression that a performer tries to evoke in front of an audience (counterpart) in interactions – under the guise of the role – is what Goffman called the “idealized view of the situation” (Goffman 1959, 35). Specifically, it consists of a set of commonly accepted values determining the rights and obligations for each participant in the interaction under a certain social relationship. For instance, the waiters in restaurants are supposed to be polite and considerate in front of the guests, and a mother usually plays a patient and guiding role when interacting with her children. These systems of values are taken for granted by people as “justified de facto” and provide “criteria for rationalization which need no justification in themselves” (Gomez and Jones 2000, 698).

institutions enable people to convey idealised impressions and in what sense corrupt practices are rationalised, it is necessary to identify the idealised views entailed by the multiple roles of CPC cadres.

To reveal the unquestioned value judgements in discourse, I adopt CDA as the research methodology. According to Fairclough's definition of "Members' Resources (MR)" – "which people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts – including their knowledge of language, representations of the natural and social worlds they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions, and so on, [...] People internalized what is socially produces and made available to them, and use this internalized MR to engage in their social practice, including discourse" (Fairclough 2015, 57), commonly accepted values are part of MR, which constitute an important object of CDA and are manifest as the unquestioned assumptions in discourse. Specifically, the analysis aiming to discover these hidden assumptions pertains to the description stage of CDA.

In this chapter, I shall mainly focus on examining the expressive values of the discourse, which has to do with social subjects' value judgements related to their self-identity. In everyday social interaction, people might not explicitly show their attitude towards certain social phenomena or public figures, while they always consciously or unconsciously make value judgements, which are reflected in their selection of words, grammatical features, as well as the ways they link sentences together. Thus most data selected in this chapter as the object of analysis are not integral, explicit statements but rather sporadic, unwitting expressions. Through reading the features of these discourse, I intend to identify the unquestioned value-oriented assumptions behind the discourse and therefore identify the idealised values. Furthermore, by referring to relevant historical and academic literature, I will briefly review the general background for the emergence of these values.

Concerning the objective of this chapter, three points need to be clarified. Firstly, it is not my purpose in this study to go deeply into the historical evolution of common values or show to what extent they are commensurate with the social state of contemporary China. Neither do I mean to describe the detailed process of how these values gradually become popularised and ingrained. Rather, with only a brief introduction of the social origin for each of them to indicate general background information, I adopt a non-chronological perspective, concentrating only on the content and circulation of these values in relevant discourse here

and now in contemporary China. In short, what I want to illustrate is an existing fact that certain values exist for their function as an unquestioned reference system for cooperative interaction in social life, but not because of the legitimacy of these values. Nevertheless, I do not intend to argue that the existing idealised values do not change or fade away. I am inclined to admit that the evolution of particular commonly accepted values is an incremental process that takes place along with the gradual transformation of productivity and productive relations of society. Such change usually does not manifest itself as a big-bang style event – though sometimes it seems to happen overnight, in fact, before the final change eventually taking place there must be a long-term quantitative accumulation – and it is very difficult to predict the exact critical point.

Specifically, the change of common values entails some necessary conditions. The most important one is their lack of ability to reflect updated social situations. As people notice a change in their interacting mode that accompanies the transforming of a socially productive structure, they will also discover the logical incoherence of existing values (Denzau and North 1994, 14). In the meantime, some new values arise as competing schemes, which constitutes another condition. Then the crux of evolution lies in the collision between old and new values and that collision specifically manifests itself in the competing and merging of their different interpretations of social affairs and key concepts. For such a debate to proceed requires a reference to changing reality and the “climate of opinion” (Hall and O’Shea 2013, 11). Finally, the most appropriate value – the one most commensurate with the social condition– wins out and becomes consolidated by being constantly invoked. But the aforementioned process is not the object of this research. I carry out my analysis in this chapter based on the premise that, in certain historical periods and among a specific cultural group, the commonly accepted idealised values are relatively stable. They present a nature perceived as common sense, which entails no need of being judged or questioned.

Secondly, I do not intend to assert that any unquestioned value itself constitutes the cause, or more accurately, the direct or fundamental cause of the persistence and pervasiveness of corruption. Instead, by proposing a hierarchical perspective towards instrumental, value and tacit rationality, I suggest that the idealised values dominating different social realms are indirectly related to the routinisation of transaction-form corruption. What really accounts for “unavoidable” corruption is the inherent and tacit need to comply with a rationalising-oriented rationality entailed by cooperative social interaction. Specifically, as rational voids, namely

the reference system of rationalisation, commonly accepted values are in essence the tools rather than the goals. Under the dominance of tacit rationality, people take action in accordance with certain values not so much to follow their true belief in these values as to produce an impression to their counterparts that they are (or will be) reasonable cooperative partners. And by acting out value rationality, people can realise all sorts of substantial or practical goals. Superficially, it seems that the compliance (be it sincere or not, conscious or unconscious) with certain values could lead to the distortion of formal rules typical of corrupt practices, but no single value is “wrong” for its own sake. Accordingly, I propose conceiving of corruption as a symbolic action evolving from a specific social context, the manifestation of compliance with common values, as well as the channel for realising instrumental purposes, rather than the initial goal. To summarise, the crux of disentangling the puzzle of “unavoidable” corruption lies in examining the expressive empirical implications of corruption rather than the normative condemnation of corruption. Though the analysis from these two perspectives might seem to be formally similar, they are conceptually different.

Thirdly, and related to the second point, I propose that the concept of tacit rationality provides an alternative theoretical apparatus to help us perceive certainty in a world of uncertainty through the lens of corruption. It not only helps to explain the mechanism underpinning the routinisation of corruption but also sheds light on a feasible perspective towards the so-called moral crisis and the reconstruction of self-identity under the overarching theme of individualisation. Scholars have long been aware of the correlation between corruption and the changing moral landscape in China. This profound change is believed to be one of the consequences brought about by modernisation, which can be understood in light of Ulrich Beck’s theory of individualisation.

Generally, individualisation is a key feature of reflexive modernity and, as interpreted by Beck, it is neither a synonym of neoliberal egoism or market egoism nor emancipation, individuation, autonomy or even autarchy (Beck 2002)⁹¹ but “institutionalized individualism” (Beck 2014). Rather than emphasising this detachment by retaining the incompleteness of the

⁹¹ Beck illustrates how individualisation encompasses three dimensions of meaning: “[D]isembedding, removal from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the ‘liberating dimension’); the loss of traditional security with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms (the ‘disenchantment dimension’); and – here the meaning of the word is virtually turned into its opposite – re-embedding, a new type of social commitment (the ‘control’ or ‘reintegration dimension’)” (1992, 128).

individual – the self – at the core of its insight, individualisation theory essentially conceptualises a radical change in the way individuals connect or reconnect themselves with each other and to the society. In a circumstance where the old system is collapsing, and the new one has not yet fully taken form, mutual commitment seems no longer exclusively to rest on well-established traditional institutions, nor is it totally dominated by new ethics. As revealed by individualisation theory, we are involved in an uncertain situation in which reconstruction of self-identity and a new attachment to the overall structure is sought. The question confronting us then is how “individualism and social morality can be harmonised with each other in new ways and how voluntarism and individuality can be combined with an existence devoted to others.” Thus, one could speak in terms of a collision and integration of the old and the new, and at the same time “a paradox of altruistic individualism or of co-operative egoism” (Beck 2014, 18:95). The relation between self-construction against the larger background of individualisation then becomes of great research significance.

China’s unique path toward modernisation and individualisation characterised by the “management of the party-state and the absence of cultural democracy, the absence of a welfare state regime, and the absence of classic individualism and political liberalism” (Yan 2010) demonstrates a unique background constituted of pre-modern, modern, and late-modern conditions simultaneously confronting individuals. As an imported term, modernisation has a more sophisticated connotation within the social context of China, which is different from that of western countries.⁹² Due to its unique historical process, China has always sought its own

⁹² Modernity is a rather broad and diachronic concept which originated from Europe. Hans Robert Jauss has investigated the historical evolution of this term. In his article “Modernity and Literary tradition” translated by Christian Thorne, Jauss defined modernity as a concept “which is meant to distinguish [...] the self-understanding of our era from its past” (Jauss 2005, 329). Though it was at first “an essentially or exclusively European phenomenon [...] appeared when Europe affirms itself as the ‘centre’ of a world that it inaugurates.” This term is now commonly used to express the “consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new” (Habermas and Ben-Habib 1981) and moreover is no longer restricted to Europe, but also applied to other regions of the whole world. Modernization correspondingly refers to the process of realising modernity. Although modernity is a broad concept with a debatable periphery, as it is always relative – today could be pre-modernity in the eyes of people living in the future and the concrete meaning of it could be different from place to place – there still exists some consensus when we use this term as part of the premise of research. First and foremost, at present, when we talk about modernity or modernisation, we usually tacitly refer to a series of changes and status of human life which emerged with the industrial revolutions. Some scholars have developed concepts such as “post-modernity,” “second- modernity” or “reflexive- modernity” to make further distinctions between different periods within the whole process of modernity or modernisation.

path toward modernisation, and the connotation of the Chinese characteristic of modernisation can be perceived from two dimensions.

The first one is the general features of modernisation, i.e. as a process within which society develops from agricultural, industrial, to high-tech oriented; from feudal, equal, to one that is multiple social relationship based. The second dimension is the particular features derived from the Chinese historical and social context. Due to disturbance from outside and internal chaos in its history, and the impact brought about by “the reform and opening up” which was motivated by a desperate wish to develop, China has had to face multiple challenges at the same time. Overall, China’s path to different periods of modernisation has overlapped. As Ambrose King summarises, the uniqueness of China’s modernisation manifests itself in three aspects: “defensive modernization” propelled by external pressure instead of internal motivation; “military, economic and political transformation” as the form and “the value crisis” as the essence; and the multiple goals of indigenization – traditional culture; imported culture; Utopian culture; Cosmopolitan culture” (King 2010).

In this sense, China provides a proper field for the study of the self-construction within a changing moral landscape under a large trend of “turbulent transformations” (Hizi 2014, 68). Among a series of social phenomena given birth to or intensified by the shock and conflicts of value, pervasive corruption is a very representative one, as it magnifies moral dilemmas “to the highest valence” (Hizi 2014, 67). How people discern corruption essentially reflects how they perceive the relationship between individual and collective interest, as well as how self-realisation is connected to the development of an entire society. It is recognised that the routinisation of corruption in China is related to what He Zengke (2000) defined as a “value vacuum” which refers to a chaotic situation when different value systems are competing with each other, and no one can achieve dominance. Qu Jingdong (2008) summarised three sets of values prevailing among the contemporary China society as traditional ethics, socialist heritage, and imported modern market-oriented value systems. He further argued that these three value systems simultaneously influence social life in a “sporadic and scattered way” (Qu 2008).⁹³ Ci Jiwei, in his treatise “Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution – From Utopianism to

⁹³ Guo Baogang (2006, 90) has also raised a similar argument: “China is currently undergoing two fundamental transitions all at once [...] the transition from a traditional society to a modern one [...] (and) the transition from a Stalinist-Maoist communist society to a market-oriented socialist one. Values, beliefs, and attitudes which originated from the traditional and Maoist societies are no longer in dominance. Economic modernisation has

Hedonism,” traces the historical evolution of the moral crisis of China from a philosophical-psychological view and conceptualises it as a process from utopianism to nihilism and finally to hedonism. He further indicates that widespread and persistent corruption is also a product of this moral crisis (Ci 1994).

Confronting the challenges brought about by individualisation with the core feature of uncertainty, what can we learn from the experience of China? Through the lens of corruption, a social action that reflects how people discern different values and self-identity, the question arises whether we perceive any certainty in a world of uncertainty. With the radical changes in not only the moral landscape but almost all aspects of social life, is there any general principle about the functioning of society that can be learnt from studies of routinised corrupt practices? Referring to the frame of tacit rationality, I suggest that society is changing in the sense that new values keep arising while old values fade away, but what has not changed and probably will never change is its inherent demand for cooperation as the fundamental principle according to which people totalise different values.

Applying the concept of tacit rationality to investigating how people adjust self-identity when participating in corruption exchanges, I contend that it is not specific value but the demand for cooperation that ultimately dominates social subjects’ decision-making. Accordingly, the identity of an individual is not determined by fixed preferences or specific value orientation but manifests a feature of constantly adjusting according to the context. Therefore, rather than perceiving the changing moral landscape as the result of conflicts between old and new, domestic and imported values, or a vacuum or crisis, it might be more helpful to look at the dynamic process of how different sets of values are re-reconciled or totalised in practical life, and therefore how people re-embed themselves within the collective. The fundamental change brought about by individualisation is the emergence of the new rational voids led by the development and transformation of productivity and change of mental structure as part of modernisation. Correspondingly, the moral landscape is changing not in the way the new values impact the old ones or how the modern market principles dilute people’s faith in

rapidly changed the way how people live, think, and act. The rise of a consumer society, the mentality of an affluent middle class society, the rapid urbanization and industrialization, the emerging information age, and the army of massive free migrant labors have dramatically altered the economic foundation to which the traditionalism and Maoism were rest upon [...] modernity is not only narrowing the gap between China and the West economically but also mentally. The influence of liberal values such as humanism, individualism, rule of law, and limited government will have major impact on China’s future political development.”

communism – in fact, whether people really believed in these values does not matter, for values are instruments or benchmarks for mutual justification – but in the way that the emergence of new ingredient entails a reassignment of the weight of each value. It is also in this sense that certain institutions are not commensurate with people’s demand, as it has limited capacity to situate all the new and old values within one frame. Therefore, a complex of informal institutions emerges and gradually becomes reinforced. They might bear a similar structure to a culturally-dominated habitus, but in essence they emerge as a result of compliance with tacit rationalising-oriented reasoning rather than being a consequence of the revitalisation of traditional values or the retrogression of moral standards.

2.1 Loyalty to the Party Organisation Associated with the Cadres’ Political Role

Behind Empty Correct Rhetoric: Sense of Belonging to the Organisation

“It is very important for us public officials to sophisticatedly intermingle empty correct rhetoric and concrete, pragmatic plans (*xuzhongyoushi, shizhongyouxu*), but at the end, it is better to talk more empty correct words.”

The expressive value conveyed through this statement from my interviewee is that for CPC cadres to fulfil either task assigned in their official position and to achieve personal progress in their career require loyalty to the party-state organisation. When I asked my interviewees what they thought was the most crucial principle for being a cadre, a familiar answer was that to complete their work was certainly important, but to always stand in the right position was the premise for the fulfilment of all sorts of tasks within the organisation. As one interviewee who worked in a local government sector of Liaoning told me, the “golden rule for hanging out well in the realm of officialdom” was to be sophisticated in intermingling empty right rhetoric and concrete pragmatic plans. In Chinese, it is called “*xuzhongyoushi, shizhongyouxu*” (concreteness in abstractness, abstractness in concreteness). The character “*xu*” literally means abstract or to some extent vague, or empty. Talking *xu* words means using correct but abstract and programmatic rhetoric. “*Shi*” denotes a reverse meaning – concrete or pragmatic. Nevertheless, abstract rhetoric is in essence not empty. Rather, it denotes a cadre’s political sensitivity, which constitutes the base for cooperation among the different levels of the party-state organs as well as among individual cadres.

The functioning of abstract rhetoric specifically manifests itself in the producing of official documents. Specifically, abstract words used as rhetoric expressing the advocating of the

party's ideas, guidance, resolutions and policies. In formal texts, the opening paragraphs ought to include forms such as "to respond to the party's spirit" or "we will follow the instruction of the Central Committee of the Party," and so on and so forth. The spirit or requirements of the party should be signified by slogans like "three musts," "five focuses," "two faiths," or "devoting to building a XX [using abstract adjectives such as beautiful, healthy or civilised] city," etc. These easy-to-remember terms are created and circulated from upper levels to lower levels and from one sector to another, and are discussed far more than the concrete plans concerning how to realise these blueprints. The extreme situation of the emphasis on "abstractness" leads to a ubiquitous phenomenon among officialdom, that is, the high-level meetings are concerned more about concrete things, namely whether and how their directional ideas have been implemented at grassroot levels; while grassroot-level meetings are suffused with empty, programmatic rhetoric. Therefore, everyone is deemed to be outstanding, in spite of the fact that the problem is never solved or even becomes worse. In other words, the decision-makers who do not have the power of implementation expect the grassroot-level cadres to work pragmatically and show initiative, but the local cadres who are supposed to transfer the programmatic ideas into concrete practices care more about abstract, standpoint issues and are always busy showing-off their loyalty. This might also partly explain the question why people tend to believe that the top leadership of the country is "good" while grassroots cadres are "evil."

The sense of belonging to the organisation is an inherent need of all organisations, and the CPC party is no exception to this. It is the fundamental premise for cooperative interaction among party members from different levels and sectors, as well as for the effective functioning of state authority. Therefore, the consolidation of such a sense is always a vital task of cadre education, which specifically manifests itself in the formal articulation of the party about the role of its members:

The crux of solving the problems confronting China is the Party, and the crux of solving the problems within the Party itself is the cadre group of all levels. The Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee is the "key role" of the "key few" [...] the provincial cadres are the key few connecting the preceding and the following [...] the county secretaries of the Party are the "key to the key few (*Shaoshude Guanjian*)."
[...] if we compare the country to a net, the three thousand counties of the country are just like the knots of the net. If they become loose, the political environment will be unstable [...]. Cadres of all levels [...] should actively

perform duties, be ready to take on responsibilities, lead the mass of people to work hard, and truly play a key role.⁹⁴

The term “key few” (*guanjian shaoshu*) accurately identifies the role the party expects its members to perform. This phrasing first appeared in the speech given by Xi Jinping at a cadre education forum in 2015 and then became one of the most frequently quoted terms used in CPC official discourse about organisation construction. On January 22th, 2019, the *Chinese Military e-paper* published an article titled “how shall the key few play a key role,”⁹⁵ interpreting the role of cadre groups as “guiding the direction, controlling the situation, coordinating, encouraging, and setting a good example” (*bahao fangxiang, bakon jumian, gaohao xietiao, gujinjiayou, danghaobiaoshuai*). The fulfilment of this role requires compliance with a series of values, which the CPC calls “the communist values.” As is well-recognised within the realm of party construction studies in China, the value system of CPC mainly encompasses four aspects:⁹⁶ the pursuit of communist ideals; to bring about the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and achieve socialism with Chinese characteristics; serving the people; and absolute loyalty to the party. When it comes to the practical level, the connotation of the communist value system further expands and has developed into a conceptual complex centering around the aforementioned four programmatic guidelines.

Among many interpretations from both within and outside the party, the deputy director of the *People’s Daily* commentary department, Chen Jiaxing, made a representative illustration of the content of communist values by extracting five meta notions from which the whole value system emanates.⁹⁷ These meta notions are loyalty, impartiality, cleanness, honesty, and introspection, among which loyalty constitutes the most fundamental one. As Xi Jinping stated in his speech delivered at the 19th NCPCC:

⁹⁴ What is the connotation of “key few” in the eyes of Xi Jinping? *Xinhua* wang, 2016 习近平眼中的关键少数有什么特殊含义 http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/03/c_1117976900.htm

Taking inventory of the 20 new hot words of Xi Jinping in 2015 盘点:2015年习近平的20个新热词 http://news.ifeng.com/a/20151228/46863642_0.shtml#_zbs_baidu_bk

⁹⁵ How shall the key few play a key role? 关键少数怎样发挥关键作用 http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/22/content_225857.htm

⁹⁶ On upholding the communist values 论坚持共产党人价值观 <http://www.djyj.cn/n1/2017/0607/c412369-29324124.html>

⁹⁷ The core elements of the communist value 共产党人价值观的核心要素 <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0607/c117092-29323261.html>

Taking a clear political stand is the fundamental requirement our Party must meet as a Marxist party[...]. The primary task of the political Party building is to ensure that the whole Party obeys the Central Committee and upholds its authority and centralised, unified leadership [...]. All Party members must closely follow the Party's political line, strictly observe its political discipline and rules, and closely align themselves with the Central Committee in terms of political stance, direction, principle and path. Every member of the Party must hold the Party Constitution in great reverence, act in strict accordance with the code of conduct for intraparty political life under new circumstances, and make intraparty activities more politically oriented, up-to-date, principled, and effective [...]. We must regard it as our fundamental political responsibility to be loyal to the Party, share the Party's concerns, fulfil the obligations to the Party, and work for the people's wellbeing, and forever preserve the political character of Communists.

If we look at the communist value set for the sake of its concrete content, we might easily get lost and confused as it appears to be all-encompassing and highly abstract. It seems that the CPC intends to include all human virtues into the frame of communist values while consequently making it a vision rather than a concrete, operable goal; it is thus everything and nothing. But if we look beyond the repeated emphasis of the CPC on these values and pay more attention to why the party keeps emphasising the importance of being an adherent to them as well as how the party addresses the crux of realising these values, we will get a different point of view.

The crucial question is not about what exactly the communist values are but the reason why cadres should stick to them. Specifically, whether the CPC members truly believe in all the party's ideas is not as important as their unconditional loyalty to the organisation that is conveyed through advocating the communist values. This is because loyalty, which could to some extent also be understood as the sense of belonging, is the fundamental premise for the existence of an organisation and the rational void underpinning the cooperation among its members. Therefore, what the party really expects its cadres to do is not to stick to certain concrete criteria for their own sake but to effectively implement whatever the party requires them to do, namely "taking a clear political stand" – as Xi Jinping stated in the abovementioned speech. "Clear" also means firm. In other words, the cadres are supposed to believe in some values not because they are following their own worldviews or that these value criteria are right in certain objective sense, but out of their unconditional loyalty to the party. In this sense, it doesn't matter what values the cadres believe in, as long as they are what the party demands them to believe in. Vice versa, if a cadre did not express compliance with certain values advocated by the party, he or she would be blamed not for being immoral but for betraying the organisation. Finally, it is in this sense that abstract words are important, as they constitute the tool of expressing the fundamental rational void underpinning

organisational life – loyalty. On the individual level, the sense of belonging to the same organisation also constitutes a vital foundation for cooperation among the cadres.

Anti-corruption as Part of CPC’s Self-rectification and Organisational Building Project

The CPC’s concern with nurturing loyalty to the organisation among its cadres is embodied in formal discourse about corruption and anti-corruption. Tracing the history of the CPC, anti-corruption has always been deemed by the party as not only an action aimed at striking at economic crimes involving power abuse but also part of its self-correction and organisational building project. The CPC sought to rectify the political ecology of the party, reinforce the integrity of the organisation, and bolster its members’ sense of belonging by launching the anti-corruption effort. Ultimately, one of the most important tasks borne by the anti-corruption effort is to emphasise the status of loyalty as the rational void within the organisation. Accordingly, though each anti-corruption effort was promoted under different themes, they finally all ended up with a mass movement touching all aspects of social and political life.

The first large-scale correction movement of the CPC was the Yan’an Rectification which took place between 1941 and 1945. It was initiated under the theme of modifying the learning style (*gaizao xuefeng*), then developed into a comprehensive movement against subjectivism (embodied as dogmatism and experimentalism), factionalism and a stereotypical party writing style. Later, until 1945, bureaucratism was added as another target. In July 1945, when Huang Yanpei visited Yan’an, Mao Zedong talked about his vision of the CPC’s future, especially on the potential crisis caused by the lack of restrictions on government, i.e. how to avoid falling into the “clean-legitimate-corrupt-demise”⁹⁸ historical cycle. Though the CPC had always been vigilant over discipline issues, the overwhelming task before the foundation of PRC was to fight against external invasion and strive for the establishment of the desired political status.

At the 2nd Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee, before it took over the big cities and truly became the ruling party of China, corruption was formally identified as a potentially vital problem confronting the CPC. Mao Zedong coined a famous metaphor “sugar-coated

⁹⁸ See the talk between Huan Yanpei and Mao Zedong in 1945.
<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8E%86%E5%8F%B2%E5%91%A8%E6%9C%9F%E5%BE%8B/7526476?fromtitle=%E5%8E%86%E5%8F%B2%E5%91%A8%E6%9C%9F%E7%8E%87&fromid=2532812>

bullet”⁹⁹ to describe the forthcoming temptations. Just as Mao Zedong predicted, embezzlement, waste and bureaucratism started to appear after the CPC formally becoming the ruling party of the PRC. Since then a series of anti-corruption movements were promoted, including the Three Antis movement (anti-embezzlement, anti-extravagance, anti-bureaucratism) from 1951 to 1952; the New Three Antis movement (anti-bureaucratism, anti-commandism, anti-violation of law) in 1953; and the Three Antis in rural area (anti-embezzlement, anti-extravagance, anti-bureaucratism) starting from 1960 and ending at around 1965. The first corruption case in Republic of China, one of the most notable events of 1952 was taken as a typical case of the working of the Three Antis movement. As a result, Liu Qingshan and Zhang Zishan were the first two cadres executed for embezzlement.

With the end of the cultural revolution marked by the 11th CPC National Congress in 1977 and subsequently the start of reforms and of opening-up after the 3rd Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978, China’s major task turned to economic development. The accumulation of wealth, however, was accompanied by an explosion of corruption. The party was aware of this crisis but not able to concentrate on combating it, as the principal contradiction facing Chinese society was the one between the growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, education was the main strategic approach of anti-corruption during this period. Deng Xiaoping gave a series of speeches on combating economic crimes and during from 1983 to 2002, the CPC launched several cadre educating activities, represented by the Three Advocates (study, politics and principles)¹⁰¹ from 1998 to 2000 and learning the important thought of the Three Represents¹⁰² in 2001 to 2002. In 2001, the 6th Plenary Session of the 15th Central Committee approved the CPC central committee’s decision to strengthen and improve the party’s style of working,¹⁰³ phrasing the party’s demand on cadres as the Eight Do’s and Eight don’ts (1. Emancipate the mind and seek truth from facts; do not keep doing things the old way; 2. Combine theory with practice; do not copy mechanically or worship books; 3. Keep close ties with the people, do not be formal or bureaucratic; 4. Adhere to the principle of democratic

⁹⁹ <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%B3%96%E8%A1%A3%E7%82%AE%E5%BC%B9>

¹⁰⁰ The 6th Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee

¹⁰¹ 三讲(讲学习、讲政治、讲正气)

¹⁰² 三个代表重要思想学习教育活动

¹⁰³ 中共中央关于加强和改进党的作风建设的决定

centralism, do not act arbitrarily or be feeble and lax; 5. Abide by party discipline, do not pursue liberalism; 6. Be honest and upright, do not abuse power for personal gain; 7. Work hard, do not be hedonistic; 8. Appoint people on their merits, do not practice favouritism in choice of personnel.).¹⁰⁴

Marked by the resolution approved at the politburo meeting in April 2013 for carrying out a rectification movement against formalism (*xingshi zhuyi*), bureaucratism (*guanliao zhuyi*), hedonism (*xiangle zhuyi*) and an atmosphere of extravagance (*shemi zhifeng*), the on-going anti-corruption effort was to be carried out centering around the theme of correcting the inner-party's political ecology. Specifically, all the policies and strategies of the current anti-corruption effort were now formulated and enacted under the guidelines of the Eight Regulations¹⁰⁵ and the Six Prohibitions.¹⁰⁶ Xi Jinping indicated the following at the 19th CPC National Congress: “the principal contradiction facing Chinese society in the new era is that between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life. We must therefore commit to our people-centred philosophy of development and devote to promoting well-rounded human development and common prosperity for everyone.” Anti-corruption had become an issue as important as economic development. Moreover, Xi Jinping also repeatedly emphasised that with the ongoing progress of institutional construction, corrupt practices were no longer present predominantly as purely economic crimes but now appeared more often to be intertwined with political problems. At the same time, the forms of corrupt exchange also diversified.

The attitude of the CPC towards anti-corruption remains firm. In the working report delivered at the 19th CPC National Congress, Xi Jinping refers to Mao Zedong's statement about avoiding repeating the historical cycle of rising and falling and emphasised that “the future of a political party or a government is determined by whether it enjoys public support. We must guard against and correct with resolve the practises the people oppose and resent. The whole Party must be soberly aware that the governance environment our Party faces is complex.” In

¹⁰⁴ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/4527671.html>

¹⁰⁵ The Eight Regulations to Cut Bureaucracy and Maintain Close Ties with the People (中共中央政治局关于改进工作作风及密切联系群众的八项规定) <http://fanfu.people.com.cn/n/2013/0109/c64371-20146477.html>

¹⁰⁶ The “Six Prohibitions (六项禁令)” used to be a set of more detailed provisions enacted by the CPC Zhejiang Committee based on the Eight Regulations and gradually became another six basic index of the organisational construction for the whole party. http://zjrb.zjol.com.cn/html/2012-12/27/content_1930977.htm?div=-1

its official articulation, corruption is conceptualised as the largest threat to the CPC's political regime legitimacy and the stability of society, which is rooted in the pervasiveness of unhealthy working styles (*zuofeng wenti*) among the cadre group. The party attributes all kinds of deviant behaviour of its cadres to a loss of loyalty to the organisation and a lack of faith in the party's ideas. As Xi Jinping emphasised on November 17th 2012, at a meeting with the theme "adhering to the socialism with Chinese characteristics, implementing the spirit of the 18th NCPCC," "in the end, all problems within the cadre group are related to the lack of faith."

By addressing faith, Xi Jinping stressed the party's standing point, that is, all the problems within the political life could be attributed to its members' lack of loyalty to the party. Accordingly, corruption is seen as a problem of faith. If we look at the official comments on cadres sentenced for corruption, we will notice that the party often concentrates on the incompatibility of their behaviour with the ideas advocated by the Central Committee, defining these individuals as unqualified party members and condemning them for losing faith in communist values and betraying the organisation, but with very little emphasis on their concrete illegal behaviour. One can thus conclude that the CPC takes combating corruption as one way of revitalising organisational integrity and therefore as a means to guarantee effective implementation of its ongoing policies. Above all, the party aims at intensifying its capacity for governance and mobilisation by reemphasising the importance of the sense of belonging to the organisation.

2.2 Tact of Interpersonal Relationships (*Renqing*) Associated with the Cadres' Social Role

Behind Reverse Selection in the Realm of Officialdom: the Code of *Renqing*

"If I was not so honest/straight, I could have become the director a long time ago."

The words above are quoted from a dialogue between an interviewee and myself, with an expressive value indicating the significant effect of the code of manipulating interpersonal relationship on a cadre's career life. At the core of such a code lies the emphasis on the value of personal commitments and ties. This interviewee informed me that "I put all my heart in to my work, but I really do not want to force myself to join that kind of thing. I mean, I do not want to offer my superiors bribery or flattery, neither am I good at manipulating interpersonal relations." It is almost an open secret among the realm of officialdom in China that good

cadres (those who concentrate on their work, do not participate in factions or play tricks in election proceedings) hardly win any chance of promotion. On the contrary, many of them are even marginalised.

My observation about another interviewee revealed a different way of behaving. This was a very sophisticated bureaucrat who used a lot of big and empty words, and joined constructive drinks with all kinds of people almost every day, even during work. What was interesting was that he worked in a technical department of the local government where personal networking does not constitute an important task. He preached to me that “do not be so conscientious, [being conscientious is] useless, the society is like this [...] serious people do not get along well with it.” Indeed, it appears to me that our unserious cadre had a lot of followers – or maybe friends – around him all the time, a leading position in his department and many apartments in the city where he works. The diligent one, however, seemed far less popular among his colleagues, had barely had a substantial promotion for decades and currently lives quite a financially restricted life.

Another typical case concerns one of the major responsible cadres who was involved in the Liaoning election bribery case exposed by the Central Discipline Inspecting Committee in 2016.¹⁰⁷ When I talked with several of this cadre’s ex-colleagues, almost all of them gave a very high evaluation on his working ability. They believed that he did not need to buy his vote at all because even without bribing the voters, his talent and achievement were enough to assure his success in the election. One of my interviewees who used to be this cadre’s subordinate commented on his ex-leader like this: “[H]e did not believe in [formal] procedures; thereby he did not believe that he can win the election by his merit. That is why he got involved in the election bribery case; he needed some ‘crooked’ techniques to guarantee his success.”

As for corrupt cadres, they often refer to the following logic to rationalise their behaviour:

¹⁰⁷ According to a report published by Caixin Online, 523 out of 619 representatives of the People’s Congress of Liaoning Province involved in this case. On 28 August 2016, the CPC Central Committee issued a notification with a harsh comment: “the Liaoning election bribery case involved a wide range of government sectors and a large number of people, it is a vicious violation of election law [...] it is shocking and thought-provoking.” The original document with more details was exclusively distributed within the Party, this comment is quoted from discursive references to this notification published on local Party newspapers. 云南铁规严肃换届纪律：出现违规违纪行为坚决查处 https://web.archive.org/web/20160913124837/http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2016-09/02/c_129267043.htm

I thought, during this period, some small problems are inevitable among the cadre group. As long as I dedicate to my career, I am not violating the general principle.

In 2016, an eight-episode documentary film about the on-going anti-corruption effort in China called “Always on the Road” was broadcast on CCTV. It was co-produced by the propaganda department of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the China Central Television to exhibit the progress of the anti-corruption effort and to educate the CPC cadres. The sentences above are quoted from the film as part of the confession of one cadre, Li Chuncheng, who was the first provincial-level (Level 3) cadre investigated by the Central Discipline Inspection Commission after the 18th National Congress of the CPC. His words represent a typical notion about the anti-corruption effort among the cadre group as well as the entire society. If we look into the resumes of corrupt cadres, many of them had prominent achievements during their tenures. My fieldwork experience echoes this finding. When I asked some cadres and ordinary people how they would comment on their ex-peers or ex-magistrates, many times, I heard very high evaluations. In the eyes of many people, some corrupt cadres are quite competent, kind and diligent. This notion leads to the over-politicisation of the anti-corruption effort in the view of society. As some of my interviewees said, “I think they [cadres sentenced for corruption] are just the victims of political struggle.”

The two most representative cases are Bo Xilai and Mu Suixin. Respectively they were the municipal party secretary of Chongqing and the mayor of Shenyang before being sentenced to jail. It is certain that they did commit crimes. But what people remember most about them is everything other than their wrongdoings. When I was in Chongqing, almost all of my interviewees told me that they liked Bo Xilai because he had brought so many good changes to Chongqing. What impressed me most was the story about the ginkgo trees, those beautiful plants along the sides of main streets which were introduced to Chongqing as part of the city’s construction plan initiated by Bo Xilai. Chongqing people love those trees and until now they still affectionately call them the “Xilai Tree.” As for Mu Suixin, who was the Mayor of Shenyang a long time ago, people still remember the landmark roads built under his initiative and his appearance on TV. “It was Children’s Day, he attended a celebrating activity and was surrounded by children; he was a kind person, a caring mayor. He shouldn’t have ended like that,” a citizen told me during a random chat on a bus.

Why are so many competent cadres involved in and sentenced for corruption to the extent that people even get a feeling of “more effort, more danger” and that those who work more

actively and with initiative also tend to commit more mistakes, especially political mistakes? I argue that in the end, our focus of the discussion should not be on detecting the “real” goal of the anti-corruption effort by revealing inside stories about political struggles or digging out whether these cadres are involved in any political struggle or not. Instead, the question is about why so many people have the attitude that corruption may be no more than a weapon of political struggle. Behind the comment “they are just the victims of political struggle” lies a hidden assumption that endorses the normalisation of a complex of corruption-inclusive informal institutions. It exists because these unorthodox operative patterns together with the unquestioned value orientation behind them are so normal and necessary for people – even including those high-level cadres like Li Chuncheng. People deem informal operative procedures as common sense, so that when confronted with the fact that many cadres are caught, they naturally conceive the reason from a perspective that there must be something else rather than concentrating on the criminal facts regarding a corrupt cadres’ acts.

All the experience mentioned above implies the existence of an unorthodox survival rule within the realm of officialdom. It seems that cadres’ daily operations are organised and mobilised not simply by work, namely fulfilling the task assigned by the Party and the Government, but rather by a series of power struggle techniques at the core of which lies the sophisticated manipulation of personal sentiments. The wide application of these techniques within the realm of officialdom has an impact on the moulding of a unique criteria of success among the cadres and erodes the rigidity of formal institutions. As another interviewee informed me, a vicious circle dominates the functioning of officialdom. Specifically, if you want to do something, you have to improve or at least maintain your current position and influence, but to do this, you must join the game to become complicit, which means to give up some principles. Finally, if you have intended to do something illicit from the very beginning, you will probably succeed; even if your original intentions were good, your actions would still be delegitimised by the illicit means. Such a vicious circle finally leads to a phenomenon that those who did more work also tend to make more mistakes, for, as one interviewee said to me, “there exists no such thing as pure self-seeking motivated or selfless *Guanxi* practice, in daily practice it is very difficult to tell the boundary between these two kinds of behaviour. The nature of *Guanxi* practice is determined by the concrete contextual situation.” Therefore, the question comes down to why does the fulfilment of routine tasks as well as the pursuit of career achievements appear to be bound to illegal tricks centering around individualised

network manipulation instead of following aboveboard and formally-prescribed rules? What does the reverse selection within the realm of officialdom indicate about the rational void in people's social role within the context of Chinese society?

Superficially, the words of my interviewee at the very beginning of this section implied a lack of virtues such as honesty, uprightness, and modesty among the officialdom, but that essentially what really led to his awkward situation was not these virtues per se but the ignorance of another widely-accepted value: the emphasis on the importance of nurturing an appropriate interpersonal relationship. Such value orientation is well recognised as a vital element of Chinese culture, and its core idea is to advocate a reciprocal and harmonious interpersonal relationship. In Chinese, it is termed "*renqing*," or "*renqingshigu*" and attracts great attention from both foreign and domestic scholars. Yan Yunxiang in his book about the flow of gifts in a Chinese village spent one chapter giving an incisive and comprehensive elaboration of the nature of *renqing* ethics in China.

He defined *renqing* as a key concept in the Chinese system of social exchange and outlined four related meanings of it: firstly, *renqing* means "human feelings," and from this aspect, it requires that one understand other people's emotions and respond appropriately. Secondly, *renqing* entails an obligation of constantly participating in the exchange. Thirdly, "in its extended usage *renqing* can be regarded as a kind of resource [...] and can be used as a medium of social exchange. Fourthly, "in certain contexts, *renqing* is used as a synonym for *Guanxi*." Founded upon the aforementioned conceptual pillars, Yan Yunxiang further identifies the criterion that defines a good man in terms of acting in accordance with *renqing*, which includes several points, such as to be willing to share, namely to interact with each other in a reciprocal way; to choose the most suitable object of the exchange so as not to break the existing social hierarchy; to make gifts "in accordance with previous interactions"; and to return the gifts in a proper manner (Yan 1996, 122-126). Mayfair Yang also mentioned the significant influence of affective sentiments on the establishment of personal connections in Chinese society. She cites a relatively extreme manifestation of *renqing*, which is called "*yiqi*." This is a notion usually used to denote the "unswerving loyalty that cements friends as if they were blood sibling." When the relationship between two persons rises to a level of *yiqi*, it means that they will put commitment to each other before either personal interests or the benefit of the people outside their small circle (M. M. Yang 1994, 119).

The Conflict between Orthodox and Heterodox Discourse about Corruption

At the core of the tact of interpersonal relationships – *renqing* – is not so much the worship of opportunism but respect for personal sentiment and commitment. To act in accordance with *renqing* usually entails sacrifice rather than the gain of personal benefit. Under certain situations, such sacrifice might require the subject to take the risk of violating formally-coded or universalistic laws. Different from the orthodox value which emphasises loyalty to the organisation and the whole society, the *renqing* principle regulates the connections among individual subjects by stressing personal loyalty. This is where the conflict exists between the orthodox and heterodox discourse around corruption.

Directing attention at the behavioral principles of cadres, and taking Zhou Yongkang’s case as the typical example, both central and local official media such as *People’s Daily*, *People’s Forum*, *Xinhuanet*, *Liaoning Daily* and so on successively published a series of articles variously titled “Jianghu working style shall be avoided,”¹⁰⁸ “Six bizarre phenomena about the reverse selection in Chinese officialdom,”¹⁰⁹ “Focusing on the reverse selection in officialdom,”¹¹⁰ and “Cadres shall prevent themselves from being infected with ‘Jianghu’ habits.”¹¹¹ In an article posted on the website of *Party Life of Jiangsu* with the title “Dedicating to the career is absolutely different from involving in wrongdoing,”¹¹² the author explicitly distinguished between “reasonable mistakes” taking place on the path towards social development and an “intentional mistake” promoted by the illicit pursuit of personal or small group interests. An article published by *HongQi WenGao* in 2017 with the title “Cadres must keep firm stance in confronting problems of principle”¹¹³ systematically interpreted the fundamental behavioural principle of CPC cadres, that is, the unquestioned loyalty to the

¹⁰⁸ *People’s Daily* 20/05/2014 党员论坛: 江湖做派要不得

<http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n/2014/0520/c117092-25038354.html>

¹⁰⁹ *People’s Forum* 22/09/2014 中国官场逆淘汰六大怪象 <http://www.dooo.cc/2014/09/31755.shtml>

¹¹⁰ *People’s Forum* 08/10/2014 关注官场逆淘汰 <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/1008/c112848-25788560.html>

¹¹¹ *Liaoning Daily* 08/11/2014 党员干部切莫沾染“江湖气”

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2014/1108/c78779-25995394.html>

¹¹² *The Party Life of Jiangsu Province* 2016 Oct. 干事与出事绝非一回事

<http://www.jssjw.gov.cn/module/download/downloadfile.jsp?classid=0&filename=1610260951350622189.pdf>

¹¹³ *People’s Daily* 24/01/2017 党员干部在大是大非面前必须保持政治定力

http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2017-01/22/c_1120360834.htm

party, and addressed the party's requirement for them to hold on to this general principle.¹¹⁴ Through a TV play "In the Name of People" produced by the Supreme People's Procuratorate of PRC, the state also explicitly conveyed the condemnation of improper personal loyalty, with one line delivered by a leading actor uttering the accusation, "Don't you take the Party Committee as the Zhongyi Hall!"¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, from the point of view of ordinary people and even many public officials, some corrupt cadres with good social relationships are deemed to be rather kind, easy-going people while the whistleblowers are seen as betrayers and spies. There was even a group of NPC members who submitted a joint letter to the disciplinary inspecting sector to defend their colleague who was evidentially accused of corruption, by asserting that the accused was a victim of political persecution. More extremely, when some influential cadres were released after serving the prison sentence, followers publicly welcomed them back with a grand welcoming ceremony.

Such a situation also indicates the difficulty of carrying out anti-corruption efforts in local level government sectors. Even though propaganda about anti-corruption is everywhere and offering bribery has already been written into criminal law, people seldom realise that what they do is bribery, and "corruption" for them is still something that should be criticised theoretically but far away from their real lives. What they see instead is only the compliance with an unalterable principle: that is, *renqing* ethics. Even in school, it is also an unwritten rule that parents should offer gifts to the teachers if they do not want their children to be ignored or even treated badly at school. This is apparently illegal, but I have never heard any lawsuit initiated by parents who are supposed to be angry about this. Instead, what I heard is they often blame themselves as "not powerful" or "not rich" enough to offer the teachers of their children more presents. A teacher once expressed her incomprehension that "I really do not understand, cadres presenting something to their superiors is nothing different from my students giving me some gifts, why is it not appropriate, or even deemed a crime?"

¹¹⁴ People's Daily 16/01/2015 人民日报评论员: 开弓没有回头箭-论学习贯彻习近平同志在十八届中央纪委五次全 <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/0116/c64036-26395301.html>

¹¹⁵ The building represents brotherhood in a traditional work of Chinese literature, "Water Margin (*Shuihuzhuan*).” It is the place where all Liangshan heroes hold meetings.

Regarding officialdom, things are no different, except that the cadres bear more of the brunt of the condemnation than people from the other walks of life due to their special social status. Many of them still believe that bribing superiors is something that they “should” do or even part of their job, and it is not about who sends present to the boss and who doesn’t, but who sends more and who sends less. A cadre who has been working in a provincial discipline inspecting committee for decades told me, “we are the isolated ones, no one wants to socialise with us. In the eyes of the colleagues from the other sectors, discipline inspecting people are all troubles.” Echoing the words of this disciplinary inspecting officer, a local cadre once also expressed his thought about the ongoing anti-corruption effort like this: “As I see it, anti-corruption is just a performance orchestrated by the party in front of the mass people because we have to show some attitude to them anyway. But in the end, we are all brothers, who would for real deal with his own brothers who stand on the same side with him?” This cadre’s discourse conveys both expressive and relational value. First, he addressed the fact that brothers should not betray each other based on the unquestioned value-orientation – brotherhood. Second, by asserting “we are all brothers,” “show attitude to them,” he distinguished the insiders (cadres) from outsiders (ordinary people).

2.3 Equivalent Exchange Principle Associated with the Cadres’ Economic Role

Behind the Popular Mentality of “Jobbing” for the Party among the Local Cadre Group

“We are just a bunch of people that job for the party.”

The sentence above is a popular saying among local cadres, which contains both expressive and relational value showing how they discern their duty and their relation to the party as well as to society. During fieldwork, I kept hearing it at both formal and casual occasions. It was either mentioned first by the cadres when complaining about working pressures or referred to as the answer to my question about how they define their social status. There are two signifying terms in the sentence: “a bunch of” and “job.” The term in Chinese for “a bunch of” is “*yibang*,” which means “a group of” or “quite a few” but in a slightly derogatory way. It is often used to describe a group of people or things when they are considered to be relatively unimportant, kind of worthless or even annoying. As for the verb “job,” in Chinese, it is called “*dagong*,” with a meaning of doing formalistic or trivial things. By using these two terms, the local cadres compare themselves to ordinary white-collar employers and to the

Communist Party of China as an employee. By asserting that they are nobody but a bunch of people who are hired to do repetitive or trivial jobs, these cadres are implying that they do not hold much decision-making power. Behind this self-mockery is a mentality that they want to emphasise their identity as “independent” individual subjects. And by emphasising their commonness and independence, local cadres also tacitly separate themselves from the party they serve, as if ultimately it is all someone else’s business and they do not have to bear much responsibility for anything. This mentality leads to many interesting phenomena.

For instance, corruption is a popular topic, even among the officialdom of the cadres. Just like ordinary people, the cadres are also enthusiastic about all kinds of gossip concerning corruption. But when I tried to talk with them about corruption more formally and concretely they became very cautious and nervous. Especially when the topic involved concrete or personal experience, they started to use another set of criterion to justify that what they did was not corruption but just about being necessarily flexible to survive. Covertly, they were claiming that corruption was always someone else’ problem, especially those who had power. But aren’t they themselves the ones with power? In the eyes of many grass-roots level cadres, corruption is something only associated with their superior or higher-level cadres. While, ironically, in the discourse of common people, no cadre is clean. As another popular saying among the public goes, “if the party puts all its cadres in a line and executes everyone for corruption, a few of them might be wronged; if the party executes every two of them, then there will be some bad apples left.”

Another common saying frequently referred to by the cadres also verifies their ambivalent attitude toward self-identity:

I cannot represent anybody or any organisation, not to mention the party, all that I am saying to you is only my personal opinion, do not take it too seriously.

Almost every time before the interview formally began, I heard such a declaration from my interviewee. Superficially, they are very careful about their words because they do not want to get into any trouble by accidentally saying anything wrong. But the repeated emphasis on the notion that they cannot represent the Party indicates nothing other than the fact that they do represent the party and they are fully aware of this. Because if they really felt on a par with the other party members without leading positions or people without party membership, they would not deliberately say it. Consequently they are trying to stay out of trouble but do not know for sure how to. This mentality also manifests itself as lazy-governance associated with

the party's anti-corruption efforts. Without the old work brief, many cadres do not know how to behave so that they decide to do nothing in order to be "safe." However, though the cadres try their best to blur the difference, more often than not the way they talk, how they act continually gives out contradictory messages.

For example, some high-level cadres live and work in sealed regions guarded by armed soldiers and these regions are called "government courtyards" (*jiguan dayuan*).¹¹⁶ As for cadres who are not eligible to live in these courtyards, they choose to live close to each other. They deliberately buy houses or apartments in the same communities. These communities are referred to them as the "family area" (*jiashuqu*) of XX section. One interviewee who lives in such a community once showed me around his living environment. He proudly introduced me to a lot of neighbours who were and still are in high positions. Apart from the living places, they also prefer to hold almost all kind of private activities in auditoriums and restaurants "only for internal use" (*jingong neibu shiyong*) rather than choose outside places, even if the service quality there is much higher.

As mentioned above, the sense of honour of being a cadre is gradually being replaced by the idea of jobbing for the party. Cadres identify themselves more as employees of the party than inherent elements of the organisation. Influenced by such a mentality, the privatisation of public office and overuse of official privilege are rationalised, as many cadres believe that all these benefits are personal assets they earned through hard work rather than something endowed by their political status. In short, they flaunt their difference by emphasising their commonness. However, where they live, what they do, the way they talk, all of this constantly shows up how different they are. The harder they try to highlight that the rewards of their work is irrelevant to their political position, implying that it depends more on personal ability as an achievement derived from fair competition, the more prominent they make the unfairness. Moreover, they discern the restraints on their behaviour as a sort of intrusion into personal interests, and view compliance with party discipline as a reluctant, noble sacrifice rather than their professional obligation. Many cadres use noble sentiments about anti-corruption on public occasions while at the same time either resisting anti-corruption policies through a passive attitude or complying with the party's requests dogmatically.

¹¹⁶ Which groups of people work in government courtyards? 在机关大院上班的都是哪几类人?
<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1604749421344787198&wfr=spider&for=pc>

All these contradictions were manifested themselves perfectly at a wedding ceremony I attended during fieldwork. It was held in the backyard of the government office area, which as stated is a closed district patrolled by military guards and open only to insiders. The cross-examination at the entrance tacitly indicated the social status of the host family. The emcee started the ceremony by introducing the host family and guests with a special emphasis on their titles. The acknowledgement of the new couple was given not only to their parents but also to their superiors, and it was really interesting that they did not show gratitude to the friends who actually contributed a lot to the ceremony. All these procedures and the tone everyone took made the wedding seem more like a commendation ceremony. Moreover, the speech given by the bridegroom's father also made an impression on me. His first sentence was "this is a safe wedding; it is completely in conformity with regulation." He said this proudly, and all the audience cooperatively applauded. But isn't being clean and honest supposed to be an inherent requirement for him? Why would he expect admiration for doing something that he is obliged to do? Besides, if he did feel safe, he would not even think about this safety or not question it. All the host did was to try to present a low-profile, but every effort merely functioned in the opposite way.

The Intensification of the Equivalent Commodity Exchange Principle among Officialdom

Behind the local cadres' ambivalent attitude towards their self-identity is the permeation of the equivalent exchange principle into the realm of officialdom. Essentially, all social subjects are inherently economic men and business principles are something relatively objective and neutral, but how people apply these rules might lead to different results, either positive or negative. China's unique path toward modernisation and individualisation¹¹⁷ intensifies the economic attributes of CPC cadres and correspondingly the influence of commodity exchange principles among those within the realm of officialdom. As economic development has

¹¹⁷ Sun (1993, 14) has given an apt description of the situation in China: "[T]he collective system that provided a guaranteed income, the 'iron rice-bowl', is breaking down. Earlier, people had hardly any scope for choice in private or professional life, but the minimal safety net of Communism offered them state subsidized accommodation, training and health care. It is this state care from the cradle to the grave, tied to the work collective in the factory or on the land, that is now disintegrating. Its place is being taken by contracts linking income and job security to ability and performance. People are now expected to take their lives into their own hands and to pay a market price for services they receive. 'The constant refrain among urban Chinese is that they can no longer keep up with the quickened pace of life. They are confused by shifting values and outlooks on such fundamentals as careers, marriage and family relations.'" All social groups are inevitably influenced by uncertainties and shifts brought about by modernisation and individualisation, and cadres are no exception.

become the primary task for the whole country with the advancing of the reforms and the opening-up policy, the unique political institution of PRC endows CPC cadres with the role as participants in economic activities on behalf of the government. Inevitably, at the individual level, business rules are also gradually internalised as part of cadres' cognitive structure of self-identity thereby intensifying their self-seeking initiatives, which specifically manifests itself as the mentality of expecting "commensurate" reward for every action. Therefore, a series of deviant behaviours arise from the commodification of a public office. The extreme manifestation of such mentality is corruption, which specifically includes power-for-power exchanges within the realm of officialdom and power-for money exchanges as part of the government-business relationship.

The whole world has viewed the booming of China's economy since the 1980s as a miracle. However, what really makes China's experience unusual and "analytically noteworthy" is not the rapid growth itself but the fact that "local government was cast in the lead role of the development process" and all this happened in a large environment without "significant political change" (Oi 1999, 2). In fact, the central leading groups of the CPC have always seen economic growth as more than a purely economic issue but rather as a political issue. Economic growth is endowed with status as an important source of the legitimacy of the regime which guarantees social stability.

This can be traced back to the mass mobilizing strategy that took place during the early period of the CPC,¹¹⁸ while the turn towards "hedonism" that started from the end of 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s (Ci 1994) was a reaction to the "failure" of the utopia envisioned by Mao Zedong, with the trend of "local state corporatism" the result of economic reform that has lasted up until now (Oi 1992 1995 1997) (X. Song 2014). Since China carried out the reforms and opening-up policy, observing the tenet that "only development is the hard truth (*fazhan caishi yingdaoli*)" initiated by Deng Xiaoping, economic development has formally become the absolute priority task. Under such an overarching theme in which everything serves economic growth, local government started to participate in economic activities as both

¹¹⁸ If one steps into a party history museum, we can see huge amounts of slogans created by the CPC during its early formation. The most predominant ones are "the CPC is a political party serving the poor people" 中国共产党是为穷人找饭吃的政党, "to get everyone cotton-padded clothes" 人人都有棉衣穿, "to fight the local tyrants and take back the land" 打土豪分田地, etc.

overseer or supervisor and stakeholder. As elements of the party-state authority (members of the ruling party of China as well as state officials), the cadres take charge of the redistribution of social wealth and therefore bear the obligation of narrowing the gap between poor and rich. While assigned the task of promoting economic growth, they directly play the role of businesspeople on behalf of the government. Oi (1992) labelled the institutional change arising with the merger of government and economy as “local state corporatism” which, as stated, is characterised by the trend that local governments are becoming company-like. The local administrative and party leaders act like the bosses with the local government as boards. To address this issue, China’s discipline inspection and supervision newspaper published an article “To prevent the penetration of the commodity exchange principle into the party”¹¹⁹ on October 27, 2018:

Applying the principle of equivalent exchange is out of the question in economic life, but not in political life. If the cadres applied commodity exchange stuff within political life, then they will lose the essential character of party members and violate the Party discipline [...] The Party organisation is not an ordinary social or economic organisation, neither “private club.” The inner-Party comrade relationship is not a market relationship [...] Seeing from the corruption cases which have been investigated in recent years, no matter power-money or power-power exchange, or bribery offering and taking, official positions buying and selling, they all bear the imprint of commodity exchange.

Focusing specifically on the government-business relationship, Xi Jinping delivered a speech calling for the establishment of a new type of “close (*qin*) and clean (*qing*)” relationship between cadres and entrepreneurs at the joint consultative conference of China National Democratic Construction Association and All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce in 2016.¹²⁰ He interpreted the connotation of close and clean as follows:

What does ‘close’ mean? For cadres, it means to hold a sincere attitude toward private entrepreneurs, to serve them, help them to solve concrete obstacles. For private entrepreneurs, it means to be honest, tell the truth and make straight suggestions when communicating with all levels of the government. [...] What is ‘clean’? For cadres, it means to keep a clean relationship with entrepreneurs. The cadres should not have greedy self-consideration, neither should they abuse public power for private gain, or make power-money exchanges. For entrepreneurs, it means to preserve moral integrity, take the right way to go, comply with the law, and to run the business brightly and decently.

¹¹⁹ “To prevent the party from the permeating of commodity-exchange principles” 防范商品交换原则向党内渗透 <https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2018/10-27/8661200.shtml>

¹²⁰ Original text see “Xi Jinping: To Construct a close and clean new type of government-business relationship” 习近平:构建“亲”“清”的新型政商关系 <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0608/c40531-29327560.html>

Since then, Xi Jinping's narrative about the government-business relationship was widely reprinted and taken by all levels of the party organisation as part of the guidelines for rectifying the political ecology within the party. In the official discourse, the unhealthy inner-party and government-business relationships are attributed to the application of business or market rules in political life and the excessive permeation of the commodity exchange principle within officialdom is mainly caused by illicit self-seeking acts. Therefore, the solution is to draw a clear line between political and economic realms.

However, in concrete daily practice, the situation is much more complicated. It is often very difficult to tell exactly how much of the motivation behind a cadre's economic activity is derived from private calculation and how much it concerns public duty when economic growth is deemed as not only a necessity of raising life quality but also an important source of the legitimacy of the regime. In a way, local cadres comply with economic principles not only for self-seeking purposes but to promote the smooth-running of the realisation of their routine economic tasks endowed by their unique social status. The pervasiveness of the equivalent exchange principle among officialdom is rooted not simply in the degenerate morality of the cadres and backward external constraints but appears to be more a result of the structural tension between their political and economic roles, which could also be regarded as the conflict between two ideal values: disinterested loyalty to the party-state and the equivalent commodity exchange principle. It is such a tension that specifically manifests itself in the competition between official and heterodox discourses.

Chapter 3 How do Cadres Totalise Different Idealised Values? – The Structure and Expressive Capacity of the Corruption- inclusive Informal Institutional Complex

Corrupt exchanges include illegal transactions between public officials and ordinary people as well as complicity among public officials within the system. It is widely recognised that the realisation of corrupt transactions within both these two realms depends on the same complex of informal operative patterns, namely a variety of forms of knowledge regarding handling personal networks. The key feature of these unorthodox procedures manifests itself in terms of all sorts of cooperative interaction being promoted based upon individual commitment instead of guaranteed by a formal authority. The neo-institutional approach focuses specifically on this “internal regulation of social interactions within corrupt networks, and their effects on individuals’ beliefs and preferences.” By highlighting the fact that “corrupt arrangements cannot be enforced with legal sanctions,” this line of thinking proposes that a corrupt network has a hidden self-governance structure – also known as the informal institution. At the centre of this governance system there is deemed to be a supervising device with the task of guaranteeing the “honesty” of each party of the corrupt transaction, and it further defines this device as the “third-party control” (Vannucci 2015). My findings from fieldwork echo this theory. Based on my observations, in China the role of the third-party supervisor in almost every interpersonal network is usually borne by a person who, as we shall see, plays the role of a central, “soul” character within the group. Centered around this iconic core character, people establish a web of resource exchange characterised by a general feature of fictive kinship with a tactful emphasis on official hierarchy. This ambivalent attribute specifically manifests itself in a delicate system of address.

Slightly different from what is emphasised by the neo-institutional approach, my observations indicate that the emergence and consolidation of informal institutions do not just serve the self-governance of corrupt transactions. Instead, their existence seems important for the realisation of all kinds of social interactions and exchanges. Corrupt transactions constitute only one form of exchange practice. In other words, such informal structures do not exclusively serve to maintain the smooth-running of corrupt exchange but rather contribute to a more general order that dominates cooperative interactions across all aspects of social life. Instead of asserting that the informal institution arises from the need to guarantee corrupt

exchanges, I suggest that its more fundamental function lies in helping people to totalise obligations and to identify their positions within the group.

This chapter demonstrates the main structure of the corruption-inclusive institution and the source of its effectiveness, namely its expressive capacity. Specifically, I focus on how a system of informal operative patterns help CPC cadres to totalise their various subjective roles within one frame in terms of conveying idealised values. According to the theoretical view of the hierarchical relations among different types of rationality adopted by this research, the corruption-inclusive or corruption-inclusive institutional complex makes up the concrete apparatus for acting out value rationality. And value rationality is the medium that bridges the instrumental and tacit rationalising-oriented rationality. Accordingly, the informal institutional complex could be seen as the tool for the realisation of subjects' utilitarian goals and the manifestation of compliance with tacit rationality. In fact, the consolidation of informal institutions is the result of a long-lasting, dynamic process. It is through a constant process of conducting that people finally establish a system of operative patterns that can create enough space for totalising different subjective roles. This chapter does not go into a detailed analysis of how exactly those informal institutions emerge and function in everyday practice but rather directly presents the final result of this process. By conceptualising the corruption-inclusive behaviour patterns as an operative configuration of flexible symbolic social actions, I intend to give a brief and abstract illustration of the feature of the informal institutions based on my empirical findings.

3.1 A Soul Character in Each Group and the Delicate Art of Addressing Others

On 27 October 2016, the CPC Central Committee passed “The Code of Conduct for Intraparty Political Life Under New Circumstances” at the sixth plenary session, emphasizing that all party members should uphold the principle of equality and address each other as “comrade.” After that, in November, an article published on the website of CPC News¹²² further emphasised that “[t]he party members and cadres have difference only in the division of labour but not in level.” Comrade, in Chinese, is called “*tongzhi*.” “*Tong*” means common

¹²² “Addressing each other by comrade’ shall be strongly advocated within the Party” “党内互称同志”理应大力倡导 <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n1/2016/1124/c241220-28893662.html>

or same, “*zhi*” refers to ambition or will. Therefore, *tongzhi* means people who share the same goal, particularly the same political pursuit.¹²³ The core meaning denoted by this term is equality or impartiality established on a common political ideal and the desalination of personal emotion. During my fieldwork, I noticed that, in concrete daily practise, cadres seldom addressed each other by comrade as prescribed by party discipline. Shortly after I started my empirical studies in local government sectors in China, the first finding that caught my attention was the delicate art of naming prevalent among those in officialdom. In fact, most of the times, they used a fictive kinship appellation system, addressing each other as Brother X or Sister X, even in the workplace. The only exception is at important meetings and cadre education classes, where in these very formal, serious occasions, cadres use the term comrade. Correspondingly, though the central committee of the CPC has long stressed the need to establish a simple, clean, equal interpersonal relationship among party members, the “unhealthy” trend within the realm of officialdom has never ceased. The consolidation of the organisation as well as its mobilisation are still largely dependent on personal commitment.

The core device of the informal institution –not only within the realm of officialdom but also other fields of society – is that every group (or small circle) has a soul character who is often called “big brother” by the other members.¹²⁴ This “big brother” bears two functions. On the one hand, this person plays a role as the symbol or the bond that represents the alignment of all the members within the network. Another important role of this soul character of the group is that they also bear the responsibility of supervising the other members’ behaviour, making

¹²³ As a matter of fact, since the foundation of the CPC, the regulation about addressing party members as comrade has been repeatedly emphasised. It was initially written into the Party Constitution in 1921, the first National Congress of the CPC. In 1965, the Central Committee of the CPC issued a notice about “the issue of the appellation within the party,” regulating that all party members shall address each other as comrade, regardless of rank and division. On 1978, the communique of the third plenary session of the 11th central committee explicitly reemphasised that all party members ought to address each other as comrade.

¹²⁴ Apart for officialdom, such a structure also exists within another important formal realm, that is, academia. In China, a professor who has many students often plays the role of a core character in his “academic empire.” The students usually call him or her teacher but sometimes also “boss.” And they refer to such a collective relationship constituted by the teacher and all the students as being a “disciple” (*Shimen*). Except for teaching, another important responsibility of the teacher is to promote cooperation among all the “disciples,” as they might come from different backgrounds and after graduation they will work in different areas and so being a disciple acts as a control centre through which they get to know each other and exchange resources. When I went to join conferences in China, I noticed that two young scholars often introduced themselves by indicating whose students they were. And once when I asked a postdoctoral student whether he could introduce me to one of his colleagues – who used to be his classmate as well, he agreed very readily and told me that “no problem, we are brothers from the same disciple.”

sure that everyone knows his or her position within the group and behave in an appropriate manner. These two tasks determine that the “big brother” does not necessarily need to be in the formal sense a leader of a working unit but must be the one who is most widely connected and therefore the best at reconciling various sets of interpersonal relationships. In other words, the soul character of the group is supposed to be the one who is able to tactfully manage his- or her own position within different situations and supervise other people so that they recognise their positions within the group. If the official leader is not recognised by his subordinates as being the most influential person of the group, he or she probably does not have as much influence as the real core person, namely the “big brother.” In this case, to mobilise routine work, the leader needs to build a good relationship with the most well-connected people in his section. As I talked to my interviewees, I sometimes heard them say that their leader was being too soft or too decent and doing everything by the book so that he or she was not able to mobilise the subordinates at all. But why is it often difficult for a decent leader who fully complies with formal rules to build up prestige among peers? What do people mean by soft or decent? And where does the influence of the “big brother” come from? A fundamental reason might be that the formal institutions emphasises only one dimension of the cadres’ status. Specifically, the formally-prescribed instructions only regulate how a cadre should behave as a public official but fail to address how they should manage the situation that they are simultaneously also social members and participants in economic activities. Therefore, a leader who is too keen on the formal procedures could fail to reconcile different expectations claimed by various roles. In this sense, only a person who is capable of situating multiple expectations within one frame and finding out the most justifiable, widely-accepted solution can become the soul character of a group. Finally, as part of the supervising task, the existence of a “big brother” is to make sure that all members of the group know that they have an obligation to accept – as a way of expressing respect for the other’s kindness, namely giving face to the one who proposes an offer – and to reciprocate. If anyone violates such an unwritten rule, the big brother could mobilise his influence to marginalise the insubordinate members or even kick them out.

Generally speaking, centered around a core character, each circle is an effective network of exchange. The fictive kinship appellation system effectively and specifically addresses interpersonal sentiment among the members. At the same time, this is carried out with a tactful emphasis on the hierarchy regarding context and audience. Such deliberate

highlighting of distinguished status leads to many interesting phenomena. For example, as mentioned above, in the workplace cadres address each other as brother or sister, however, in some private occasions – when people are more likely to show their personal feelings, they address the people who are supposed to be their “friend” using their official title. I still remember my experience of attending another wedding, and, since I had known the bride for a long time, she invited me backstage to help her with the preparatory work before the wedding started. Not long after I arrived, I noticed an intriguing phenomenon. Since both sides of the new couple came from high-ranking official families and they themselves also worked for the government, most of the people backstage were their colleagues. When the talk was among the circle of colleagues from the same working unit, they addressed each other by name or “Sister X,” but when I was involved in the conversations, they switched the appellation mode to using official titles. Speaking of personal feelings, this made me uneasy. It was quite strange that in such a private occasion, the bride and bridesmaid – who were supposed to be close friends – talked in this way, like saying “Director Z, is everything ready over there?” Maybe this was not only strange but funny as well, while in terms of observing the function of discourse in creating the structural order of a situation, this is a good instance.

Building upon the receiver or audience’s (which was me) feeling of being excluded, the producer of the meaning (people who were from the same working unit) was wittingly or unwittingly creating a boundary which marked the distinction between insiders and outsiders. By doing so, they reminded all the people in the room that they were not only friends but also public officials and commoners. Moreover, even within the group of insiders, they are not only friends and comrades but also superiors and subordinates. The hierarchical relation was reinforced by the sophisticated manipulation of modes of appellation.

If cadres express their closeness based upon strong personal connections through the use of a fictive kinship network, then the tactful emphasis on the hierarchy complements their performance by signifying their loyalty to the organisation, for hierarchy is one of the fundamental structures of an organisation, especially within the bureaucratic system. By consciously highlighting the official title and their difference from the other people, the cadres were actually continually emphasising their subordination to the party – the organisation they belonged to. This is to say, when they played the role of one of their own in front of each other and when they highlighted the public role depended on who the audience was, as when they engaged with each other, the personal connection built upon their common status took

the dominant position; but when engaging with outsiders their public role was the one emphasised. It is also in this sense that the boundary between public and private is blurred, as the foundation of loyalty to the organisation, which is supposed to be the common pursuit, is covertly replaced by the sense of acceptance of a common social status as well as the will to maintain the privilege that comes along with such a status. Moreover, the deliberate highlighting of both public and social roles conceals the instrumentalist motivation behind the manipulation of the network.

3.2 Favour Exchange as Symbolic Social Action rather than Habitus or Goal

Currently, there are two predominant views toward favour exchange in China. The cultural approach regards it as a habitus or tradition that is rooted in Confucian Li, specifically the traditional political philosophy of “the family-country-army isomorphism” (Ke and Yue 2014). Advocates of this line of thinking focus their interest on exploring why Chinese society has developed Confucianism and why it survived the country’s long history and became the dominant ideology of the Chinese society (Hsiung 2013, 17). Another view perceives favour exchange as nothing but an instrumentalist action under the name of Li, at most a fake Li (Ruan 2016) and therefore the pervasiveness of illicit exchange among officialdom should be accounted as the result of the permeation of business principles into political and social life. While I suggest that these two perspectives are both partly right. They both overlook another two crucial dimensions of social exchange action – as both credential and obligation. Rather than asserting that social exchange – also known in Chinese as *renqing wanglai* – is the product of either deep internalised “backwards” ethics or the impact of the business exchange principle, this study perceives social exchange as a symbolic action, taking both traditional values concerning interpersonal relationships and equivalent modern market exchange value as rational voids to be expressed instead of the substantial goal to be realised. In short, I argue that ritualised social exchange is related to but not dominated by utility or culture, as how people manage exchange in terms of how they select the counterpart, objects and means reflects culturally-dominated and market-oriented values, but the exchange action is motivated not by these values but instead by a demand for cooperation.

Mayfair Yang reached an intriguing finding in her famous book about the art of relationships in China, which also echoes my own experience during fieldwork. She noted that if a person

intended to keep “safe” by avoiding *renqing wanglai* and thereby preventing them from involving themselves in any illicit transactions, after some time this person would find that she or he was marginalised and finally would hardly be able to be promote any social work even including the routines in their job. Moreover, Yang also summarised that in China, neither personal nor official relationships alone could help get things done, instead – referring to her own experience of gaining access to visiting a factory – only working along both lines can people achieve a satisfactory result. Yang further stated in her argument that the boundary between *Guanxi* practice and corruption was rather delicate. The art of *Guanxi* cannot be understood simply as something equal to corruption because concrete interest is for most of the time not the only concern, or even not the concern at all. In interpersonal interactions, the influence of personal character on the establishment of an obliging and reciprocal commitment between two Chinese people is as important as that of instrumentalist motivation (M. M. Yang 1994). This insightful point of view confirms the multifaceted nature of social exchange. Such action is endorsed not only by attaining all sorts of social resources, as it superficially appears to be, but also by its symbolic meaning. In fact, exchange is never only about exchange for its own sake but more about signifying the wish for, agreement with and the fulfilment of reciprocal cooperation.¹²⁵

Firstly, social exchange action represents itself as a credential, as it symbolises the establishment of a cooperative commitment between participants in an interaction. Such commitment builds on mutual understanding and bases the agreement on developing a reciprocal relationship. The most important thing to notice is that such credentials for entering into a relationship or a circle are not granted randomly. How people choose their counterparts for exchange reflects the process of how they totalise values and expectations. It is also on this basis that I contend that social exchange is not a cultural phenomenon in China. Perhaps it used to be but now it appears to be more a form of symbolic behaviour which only incidentally shares a similar structure with *renqing wanglai* in the traditional sense.

As one of my interviewees told me: “[I]n the old days, we did unconditionally help our relatives, but time has changed. I do not mean that I do not consider kinship affection at all, I

¹²⁵ “这就是在关系学中能发现‘有义务给予，有义务接受，有义务汇报’这样的成分，一种非营利的，工具性的慷慨的混合，同时也是自愿和强迫的互惠的混合，‘礼品经济’这个术语也说明不论什么可从关系学中得到的物质利益，都只有遵循这种关系的仪式化形式的规定才能得到” (M. M.-H. Yang 2009, 8).

mean I cannot consider only affection. If a close relative asked me to find her son a job within the system, I would still try to help, but not in the old way. I have to observe firstly whether this boy is competent. I only help people who deserve help. If he does not fit the job, I would rather suggest him to try other positions.” This cadre’s words indicate that, rather than a culturally dominated choice, *renqing wanglai* is becoming more and more like a result of negotiation. His decision has to embody not only care for family members but also impartiality as his duty claims. Therefore, he will find his nephew a job in his department only when the boy fits the requirements of the position, namely when his help is justifiable in the sense of both public duty and personal consideration. To some extent, from the point of view of the favour-asker, the willingness to help of the favour-giver, as well as the realisation of the exchange between them, is a credential for gaining access to the network. But this credential is granted based on commitment, and the establishment of the commitment requires totalising.

My own experience confirms this inference. I was once making contact with a friend who worked as an 8-level official in local government. I asked him whether I could interview him. Since he knew me quite well, and I had explained to him clearly about my research, I expected that he would agree to take part in my interview. But a few days later he replied in a quite bureaucratic tone that “we are required by our superiors not to accept any interview.” His words appeared quite interesting to me because on the one hand, I had just talked to one of his superiors who never mentioned such a requirement; and on the other hand, his work did not involve any sensitive issues at all, not to mention I did not intend to pry after any secret information. This experience is intriguing in the sense that, to think in a stereotypical way, he should have accepted my interview as we were friends, but he didn’t. He not only refused but also constructed a rather bureaucratic excuse. The point was, as we were rather familiar with each other, why did he not just refuse me explicitly rather than respond in a deliberately mystifying way? Referring to the thesis of tacit rationality, his excuse actually implies the lack of foundation for establishing a cooperative interaction between him and me. He did not want to help me not because he really took offering help to me as a rule-breaking act – as implied by his excuse – but rather because if he took my interview as only a friend, then our interaction would only be rationalised in terms of personal relationship. In this sense, such an action could express only friendship and neither the impartiality required by his role as a public official nor the equivalent exchange principle as he did not know for sure what kind of

potential trouble I might get him into and in what form I could return him the favour in the future. Regarding these considerations, I failed to have the “credentials” to build a mutual help relationship with this person – even if he was personally a friend, for certain idealised views are not confirmed as part of the consent between us. The realisation of exchange as well as the justification of a purpose rest on expressing all the involved idealised values, and, vice versa, if a thing does not work, it means that certain values haven’t been expressed.

Secondly, engaging in constant exchange also constitutes a key obligation for an individual within a certain social network. On the one hand, it declares the identity of the individual as part of a group; on the other hand, it is proof of having faithfully fulfilled the obligation, or we could say, a person’s reputation with regards to whether she or he maintains commitment to the group. It is also in this sense that every circle needs a “big brother” to play a role as supervisor. As my field research progressed, I noticed that people’s mutual trust and long-term cooperation were built upon the fulfilment of the obligation of exchange. When someone introduced me to another person, I often heard them talking about each other by saying that “he is a good friend, every time I got into trouble he will help me out, so we have a very strong relationship.” Also, when I tried to build a connection with my interviewees, at the very beginning, they usually showed a conservative attitude toward the cooperation between them and me. But as long as they realised that I did keep my promise – though it was not necessarily made in an explicit way – and had fulfilled my obligation – for example helping their children with English learning or introducing them to someone else I knew. Then they apparently started to trust me more and became more enthusiastic to help. What I did for them were all trivial things, but it was not about what substantial profits I could bring to them. Instead, it was about them seeing me as a person who can be trusted based on what I had done. As Smart (1993, 402) indicates, “[i]nstrumentalism and sentiment come together in *Guanxi*, as cultivating *Guanxi* successfully over time creates a basis of trust in a relationship.” Superficially, mutual exchange is about the flow of resources among social members, but in essence it is also a symbolic action representing the commitment of cooperation based upon participants’ common understanding of the situation given their hierarchical relationship, mutual affection as well as instrumentalist significance to each other.

3.3 Symbolic Meaning Embodied in the Selection of Counterpart, Object and Means

Basically, a complete exchange action encompasses three elements: participants, means of transaction (specifically including the selection of place, which could be understood as what Goffman calls “props” of the stage; the time of exchange; whether an intermediary is needed), and the object (be it money or gift, or a promise of offering help to do something). All of them can function as expressive units helping participants address their mutual relationship and convey the corresponding meaning they need to act out. Corruption studies often take these elements as an inevitable result caused by certain flaws in the external constraining system, while barely paying attention to either the subjectivity of participants in selecting their counterpart, the ways of doing the transaction and the object or the meaning conveyed through these initiative adjustments or manipulations. I hypothesise that the meaning instead of being the result of corrupt exchange constitutes its fundamental motivation, and is the focus of this analysis. Because superficially, people attempt to attain personal interest by taking part in exchanges which do not exclude corrupt transactions, in essence, what makes people achieve what they want is not simply taking part in exchange behaviours but rather dealing with it in the right way. To put it another way, an exchange does not just mean an exchange for its own sake; it is more of a symbolic action through which people denote their roles, hierarchy and relationships as well as their consensus on the view of the situation. In a way, gaining interest is not the only goal of exchange, and sometimes not the goal at all. Instead, the goal is to express certain meanings. Accordingly, if a participant did not manage the exchange in an appropriate way, which means that he or she chooses the wrong counterpart, impertinent way of carrying out the transaction, or an object with too high or too low price, the exchange could fail. Therefore, ritualised exchange constantly gets reinforced because it leaves a space for subjects to totalise different idealised views and expectations.

The CPC has set a rather high standard for its cadres and enacted a series of regulations to restrain inappropriate interpersonal exchange. To some extent, this is necessary, but on the other hand, many rigid rules are not implemented well because it emphasises only one aspect of the position of the cadres, namely their role as members of a political party, but intentionally ignores their social and economic roles. It is also in this sense that the informal institution appears to be more effective than the formal ones. To conclude, from the view of rigid laws and regulations, some exchanges are defined as corrupt, while in daily practice they could be rational choices justified by their symbolic meaning that fit the need of the environment. Guided by this thought, I will give three concrete examples to demonstrate how

people totalise idealised views to maintain the cooperative interaction through the selecting of counterpart, the means of a transaction, as well as the object of exchange, and at the same time why certain formally-identified corrupt practices are deemed to be rational and justifiable actions.

When I did my fieldwork in a prefecture-level city in Liaoning province, my interviewees often mentioned one of their ex-mayors who had been sentenced to the jail for taking bribes. One of them informed me of his opinion in the following words:

He is a man of principle [...] not that kind of cadre who deals with everything like doing business and takes any chance to extort. He only socialises with those he thinks highly of, some are his colleagues, and some are entrepreneurs whose enterprises contribute more to the local economic growth.¹²⁶

The most common comment I heard about him was “he is a man of principle.” I could see from my interviewees’ facial expression that they felt sorry for this mayor and they appreciated his “principle,” which was, as they indicated, making deals with only those who had potential to benefit local development. In their eyes, the mayor might have been involved in corruption problems, but he had not intended to do so, which is evidenced by the fact that he did not take bribes for the sake of taking bribes. As interpreted by his colleagues, what he really cared about was the character or capability of the person with whom he was making contact. In this sense, we could see that the same action, such as making a corrupt exchange might bear different meanings when conducted by different subjects. From the viewpoint of my interviewees, if the mayor simply took money from everyone and traded entrusted power for personal benefit without any “principle,” he was no doubt a corrupt cadre. However, if he cared more about his duty and valued the good character of his counterpart and based on that offered his support, then the symbolic meaning of the exchange would be changed. His support then represents the fulfilment of his duty as a public officer who was tasked to select competent people to contribute to the development of the city rather than his own interest.

The party forbids cadres from taking part in inappropriate socialising activities. Meanwhile, the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate is really difficult to discern. Sometimes the connotation of a banquet could be much more than seeking the establishment of an illicit exchange network as indicated by its superficial meaning. The key point is that through the

¹²⁶ This comment is cited from one of my interviewees who works in local government.

selection of a counterpart people not only seek out their potential cooperative partner but at the same time also convey their evaluation of each other. As an entrepreneur informed me, “there are rules for giving gift, people do not accept gift from anyone. If they think highly of you, they will accept your gift or even treat you like family; but if they do not like you, they will follow the principle of ‘business is business.’” In a way, giving and accepting a favour or gift is a means by which people give face to each other. Taking another example, one of my interviewees once mentioned to me about her personal experience applying for a certificate. She said, “the officer refused to issue the certificate because I forgot a proof document, he asked me to complete the paper submitting procedure next time. But I needed the certificate urgently. Besides, it would be a waste of time driving home and back repeatedly. So I tried to cotton up with him.” Then my interviewee told the officer that she worked in the same unit with him, just in another section. She showed her employee’s card to the officer. And then they started to complain about the common troubles they had experienced at work. Finally, the officer seemed quite happy that someone finally understood his own pressures. He issued the certificate to my interviewee and asked her not to forget to submit the required document when she had time. In this case, if the officer and my interviewee did not have any personal connection based on common experience, the officer would take a rather bureaucratic position. But after they got more familiar with each other and this officer happened to gain a good impression of my interviewee, his attitude changed. Since the officer was willing to build a friendship with my interviewee, his position was no longer just that of an officer. In this sense, he issued the certificate in terms of helping a colleague who had made a good impression. By doing this he expressed his kindness claimed by the role as a friend instead of making an exception for a stranger, while without going too far in bending rigid rules.

Another example concerns the selection of the means of doing transactions. Once I met a taxi driver who told me about his experience of being a “white glove” when he was working for a private entrepreneur. His boss was a very successful businessman who ran a factory in the county he lived in and had a daughter who was about the age to go to school. Since there was no high-quality primary school in that county, the boss intended to send her little girl to the top school in the capital. But according to the nearby-enrollment policy, this would be impossible. Therefore, his boss decided to bribe the principal of the school. After being refused several times, this well-connected businessman finally somehow made contact with a man who had once offered the school principal substantial help and entrusted this person with

the task of persuading the principal. The principal finally compromised and decided to accept the local entrepreneur's daughter, as well as his thank you gift. But with just one condition: the principal would not meet him personally any more. This is how the teller, who was at that time working as a private driver for this entrepreneur, got involved in the transaction. This driver told me that his boss gave him a very unimpressive dark-coloured box and asked him to deliver it to the school principal at the appointed time. So he went to the principal's office. "I was quite surprised that the door was wide open, but there was nobody in the room. I waited for quite a while, but still, no one came. Finally, I realised that the principal deliberately arranged this to avoid seeing me. So I put the box on the office table and left." A few days later, the principal called his boss, reminding him of the start date of the new semester and not to forget to finish the paperwork. At first glance this is a story of a sophisticated offering and taking of a bribe, but the hidden meaning behind it is far more than that. At the very beginning, the principal was sticking to the rules, having no personal connection with this entrepreneur. In such a situation, the principal needed to play only one role, that is, in his public office as leader of a public school. But when the person who had helped this principal started to intervene, confronting this person, the principal was no longer just a public officer, but also a friend as well as a debtor. Then returning the favour became something that must be done, as it represented the sentiment between friend and the conscious compliance with the equivalent exchange principle. However, the principal did this not out of a willingness to help the entrepreneur but to pay the favour back to another person, so this "help" was offered quite reluctantly.

All these considerations have been expressed through the way in which the transaction was managed. Firstly, the principal refused to meet the entrepreneur in person so as to convey a signal that there never was and will not be any personal connection between them. By doing this the principal intended to emphasise that as a public officer, he was fully aware of his position and trying his best to adhere to the principle of impartiality. Secondly, by hiding away from the deliverer, the principal also wanted to convey the information that such behaviour is not suitable for someone holding a public office. The only reason he did this was to return the favour to his friend. In other words, this transaction was not something between the principal and the entrepreneur, but between the principal and his friend. This case thus exemplifies the compulsory attribute of social exchange and how people rationalise their actions by manipulating the means of doing the deal.

The third example demonstrates how the selection of the object of transaction signifies the idealised values. Nowadays we can often see investment-seeking delegations led by the highest-rank cadres from different administrative regions. These delegations travel around the country (usually from the relatively less developed areas to the richer areas) and do their best to attract investment to stimulate regional economic construction. This kind of activity is very likely intertwined with corruption, largely because many local governments cannot afford the expenditure of these investment-inviting activities due to a very limited budget, so they often need financial support from local entrepreneurs. A private entrepreneur told me about his experience of building a personal connection with a high-level government officer by sponsoring an investment-seeking trip. He had been waiting a long time for a chance to meet this officer. However, the officer seemed to be unreachable, as he turned down all this entrepreneur's offers, be it either through obvious bribery or a banquet. But one day, this officer took the initiative to contact him and asked him whether he had interest in joining the investment-seeking group as one of the delegators for local entrepreneurs. "I was very delighted and could read the hidden meaning behind this invitation," is how he described his feeling after hearing this good news. Then this entrepreneur offered to be one of the sponsors of the trip and this time the officer did not turn him down. Also, during the trip, the entrepreneur got a chance to communicate more with the officer as he wished. Strictly speaking, by accepting the sponsorship from the entrepreneur, this officer finally got involved in a corrupt transaction. Though neither side of the exchange explicitly stated this, they still made a "deal" tacitly. The entrepreneur who got the chance to support the official trip was motivated to do so because, in the future, maybe very soon, the officer would pay back the favour by supporting the sponsors' business with administrative power. But what is noticeable about this case is that, as the officer had turned down all the previous offers from the entrepreneurs, we could not presume that this officer was a cadre who put pursuing illicit personal gain first. Rather than define the transaction between the entrepreneur and the officer as corruption or secret collusion, maybe it would be more accurate to comprehend it as an alternative way of fulfilling official business.

By proposing to make the sponsor money as the object of transaction, the officer conveyed three meanings. Firstly, only when the money offered by the entrepreneur was used to support the development of local economy instead of to benefit the officer himself, would it be accepted. In this sense, the officer showed his position that he did not want to betray his

entrusted power. Secondly, concerning personal sentiment, the officer wanted the entrepreneur to know that his efforts were not in vain, thereby the officer was pleased to give him a chance. Thirdly, by taking this entrepreneur to the investment-seeking meetings, the officer indirectly offered him more chances to cooperate with entrepreneurs from other cities. On the one hand, this could be seen as the reward for the entrepreneurs' generous financial support. On the other hand, since such chances of cooperating with peers from other cities were endorsed or guaranteed by local government, it would benefit not only the entrepreneur but also local economic growth.

Chapter 4 Participant Observation of a Constructive Drinking – A Live Example of the Establishment and Rationalisation of a Potentially Corrupt Exchange Network

A Brief Introduction

This chapter depicts a live example cited from my personal experience of how a potential corruption exchange network takes shape and is rationalised under the tacit domination of rationalising-oriented rationality. Applying a set of CDA methods and based on the transcription of my voice diary, I shall thick describe a constructive drinking. And along with the analysis of the process of this event, I attempt to showcase how corruption-inclusive informal institutions emerge out of people's constant interpretation and management of a situation, as well as in what sense they help to totalise idealised views to create the foundation for cooperative interaction.

About the Selection of Data

From October 2016 to May 2017, I had been conducting field research in China. Soon after I went into the field, I noticed that conducting a field study on corruption was both easy and difficult. It was easy because everyone – even including CPC cadres who were supposed to be the target of the critiques of corruption – was enthusiastic to talk about the topic. People took hearsay about corruption as a perfect subject for gossip. While at the same time, talking about corruption with people could also be difficult and even misleading because everyone seemed to know something about it, but very few people knew anything for real and for sure. As one Chinese scholar half-jokingly commented on the situation, “people who knew the truth were reluctant to talk, while those who knew little talked too much.” Moreover, people enjoyed talking about corruption at the abstract level for the sake of venting their dissatisfaction with unjust treatment they had received. Yet, when the topic came to their own experience and concrete cases happening around them, they started to act unnaturally and use evasive words.

As my fieldwork progressed, I realised that the best method to apply to investigate the hidden principle that dominates people's decision-making and forces them to participate or reject certain behaviours such as corruption is to ditch fixed questions and assumptions. Or maybe one could say that the researcher should keep the ex-ante suppositions in mind instead of letting them lead the field study, and instead take part in the daily life of their interviewees.

As such, it would be more helpful for us to look at how things actually happen instead of confusing ourselves by sticking to the question of why things won't proceed as what we think they should. Formal interviews informed me more of the orthodox, abstract norms as one dimension of constraint on people's social action, while the most authentic data enabling me to get a comprehensive understanding of local cadres' logic of operation came from the participant observation of many casual and half-casual activities. In other words, interviews offered me access to how people accounted for their practices rather than to the factual practices themselves (Flick 2014, 308). I gradually learned not to take notes or record in front of my interviewees. Instead, I made a voice diary right after the interviews or group activities and tried my best to record every detail faithfully. Such experience provided me with an opportunity to play a role as both insider and outsider so that I could capture as many of their subtle mental and emotional activities as possible. Moreover, I was able to learn the procedures of how local cadres balance different expectations, delicately manufacture impressions in front of each other, and deal with outsiders in their routine operations by personally practicing them in concrete contexts.

Looking back on the whole process of my fieldwork, I find that it was a live exercise of building up exchange relations with people from different walks of life, especially local cadres. The most intriguing part is that, though I was always trying to make my data collecting aboveboard through a series of efforts to form a bond with and win the trust of my interviewees, I suddenly realised that I myself was also involved in a complex of informal institutions and became a participant in an all-inclusive boundary-blurring exchange network. It was rather ironic that a student who studies corruption finally made herself a potential "corrupt element," and a dissertation talking about corruption is completed based on the experience of establishing a potential corruption network. But it was also the live experience of how I kept adjusting my performance and finally reach a compromise that strengthened the empirical part of this research. The reflection on my personal experience directly leads to the formation of my theoretical frame and the emergence of my hypothesis.

And concerning selecting out the most impressive and representative data to support my argument, I finally focus my sight on the experience of participating in social drinkings. Constructive social drinking is probably the most common and important socialising activities of the local cadres in China. This afterwork activity has both a purpose and has its own rituals. In fact, cadres prefer to discuss not only personal but also many routine work related

issues during such half-casual occasions rather than in the formal workplace, which makes constructive drinking a perfect arena to observe how people manipulate different registers and achieve a balance between public and private roles. From among several experiences of taking part in constructive drinking, I focus here on the most representative one. Firstly, the participants involved in the following narrative included not only public officers – though most of them were officials – who worked in different departments of the same unit but also one private entrepreneur and myself. This allowed me to observe not only how local cadres interacted with each other but also how they dealt with people from outside their circle. Secondly, it was quite a long-lasting constructive drinking session, and therefore I got a chance to go through almost all rituals of such socialising activities.

About the Research Methodology

The analysis of this chapter will be divided into two parts. The first part examines the concrete progress of the event, referring mainly to the frames and techniques required by the description and interpretation phrases of CDA, and the second concentrates on abstract, theoretical reflection which belongs to the explanation stage of CDA.

Concerning the first part of the analysis, there are two points that need to be noted. Firstly, in terms of the progress of the event, namely the constructive drinking itself, the first part of the analysis contains two stages. The analytical focus of the first stage is to examine how I get access to the circle through the compliant invoking of informal institutions to justify my identity and purpose. My success is finally marked by the establishment of a mutually recognised cooperative relationship between the other participants and myself. The agreement on this relation also represented my commitment to taking part in an exchange network which does not exclude a potentially corrupt transaction. The periodic progress I made during this whole process is specifically reflected in the changes in how they address me.

The second stage of analysis concentrates exclusively on examining the symbolic social meanings behind several concrete exchanges that took place during the rest of the constructive drinking. I attempt to look at what people asked from each other and how they manipulated verbal and nonverbal symbolic actions to set clear identities, obligations, and power relations, and thereby rationalise their requests – be they licit or not particularly licit. The focus of analysis is to examine how people select the counterpart, means, and object of the exchanges. By doing this, I intend to demonstrate an argument that the ritualised exchange behaviours

which do not exclude corrupt transactions are endorsed by their symbolic meaning within concrete contexts. Additionally, the effectiveness of these behaviour patterns depends on whether they can reflect the relationships, obligations and idealised values claimed by the subjects' social position.

Another issue about the first part of the analysis concerns the specific analytical frame and techniques used. To maintain the fluency of the narrative and to keep the integrity of the analysis, I do not draw a clear line between description and interpretation. How people discern impartiality, the telling of right from wrong, and make decisions about whether to join in or reject certain actions in every day conduct is not determined by specific legal or moral criterion but determined by whether it serves to express common values that fit the ongoing circumstance. This reasoning process thus manifests itself in a constant mutual interaction between the production and interpretation of discourse. In other words, the selection of words depends on an appropriate interpretation of the situation, and the expression of the latter also relies on the former. To conclude, the first part of this chapter deals with how corruption-inclusive institutions function to totalise idealised values by examining how unquestioned values – as part of MR – are invoked and at the same time reconsolidated by participants through their constant interpretation of each other's discourse and the production of responsive discourse. Such a process is fulfilled through the interaction between idealised values and “a screen of symbols,” i.e. “a protective belt around” these rational voids (Gomez and Jones 2000, 700). A crucial constituent part of the latter is discourse bearing particular experiential and relational values. Specifically, the reference to idealised values stimulates certain common experiences and knowledge of people about the physical world and social relations. Then people interpret the situation based on this background information and respond effectively. Correspondingly, the connection between common values and the relevant experience also gets reinforced. In a way, the belt of symbols can also be regarded as the nexus that connects the explanative and interpretative analysis of the CDA.

As for the second part of the analysis, the focus moves to the dialectical relationship between individual agency and the institutional and societal structures. If the descriptive and interpretative analysis deals with the concrete process of how problems arise and how people resolve them, then explanative analysis concerns the power behind people's respective strategy, namely what makes them choose certain ways to solve the problems. Referring to the thesis of tacit rationality as the general explanatory frame, I intend to illustrate how people

mobilise subjective creativity to manage operative space within the situational structural frames and to sustain or change them. The whole process of the mutual interaction between individual and social structure specifically manifests itself as the invoking and producing of discourse. Accordingly, I argue that the informal institutions (with ritualised exchange as a crucial ingredient) are unavoidable or necessary because they provide a space for cadres to totalise or manipulate when confronted with the task of performing multiple rules simultaneously. In this sense, corruption is in essence no different from any other social exchange action.

Furthermore, the explanative analysis in the second stage could also be seen as my interpretation as an observer, if the analysis in the first stage concerns my interpretation as a participant. It is necessary to distinguish between these two types of interpretation, for “to develop self-consciousness about the rootedness of discourse in common-sense assumptions of MR” (Fairclough 2015, 176) constitutes a crucial task for the critical analyst. Only with an awareness of what she is doing can the analyst maintain a distance from subjective judgments and develop a general social theory.

Description and Interpretation: The Arising and Resolving of Problems during the Event

Blending in the Circle

That impressive constructive drinking session was scheduled to take place on a weekday evening at around seven o'clock. Being a little bit nervous, I made an appointment with my introducer – who was also one of my interviewees – and went to his office at about half past five. I hoped that he could tell me something about the background of the participants and inform me of the shoulds and shouldn'ts, of what I needed to be aware of, because I did not want to unintentionally offend anyone for lack of knowledge about the rules. He told me that he initiated this get-together for three reasons. The first one was to introduce me to his circle so that I could get an intuitive feeling for their daily life. The second reason was that he had not met his old friends for quite a while since he had been assigned to another section. Finally, he said he also wanted to introduce another friend of his – a private entrepreneur running a business in the suburb who was encountering some trouble – to these colleagues and see how they could help. So basically, except for the entrepreneur and me, all the other participants would be local cadres who are or have been at the same bureau but in different

sections. They were all about forty to forty-five years old and occupied the leading positions (director of the section, ranked as level seventh or eighth level) in their professional areas.

Among all these public officials, one of them intrigued my curiosity. This person used to be a public officer who had been working in the same bureau with my introducer for quite a long time. He was the eldest among this circle and also the one who had the widest social connections. He quitted his job in the government several years ago and started to run a restaurant, which was also the place our get-together would take place in. “We all respect him. He is still one of us. This is why we often go to his restaurant. On the one hand, we should not hold a get-together like this without inviting him; and on the other hand, having dinner at his private-owned place makes us feel at home.” So my introducer told me. From his facial expression and his tone when talking about this “big brother,” I felt that, though my introducer was the one who initiated this get-together, he was not the core person of this circle. Rather, the real host was the boss of this restaurant.

After the entrepreneur friend of my introducer arrived at his office, we set off walking to the restaurant. We got there about half an hour before the scheduled time so that I was able to observe the entrance of every participant. What was intriguing was that, after a short introduction, almost everyone started the conversation with me by emphasising how close their relationship was between them and my introducer:

“He is [like] my brother. Whenever we need each other, just say it. Anytime.”

However, casting aside the repeatedly declarations regarding their firm friendship, their reaction to the entrance of different people implicated their conscious but tacit emphasis on the hierarchy within the group. In the beginning, they greeted and chatted with each other in a relaxing and equal way, but when the last people entered the room, they all stood up very quickly. The brief silence signified an atmosphere of tension. As I quickly ran my eyes over the room, all the people kept a rather stiff posture and nervous facial expression. They were supposed to be “friends,” but the way this last comer said hello sounded more like a leader greeting his subordinates. Then I realised that he must be the owner of the place, the “big brother” of the circle. He swaggered into the room and took the host seat by the table. My introducer sat next to him, and I sat next to my introducer. The people who sat on the other side next to the boss was the person with the most seniority among these officials. A few weeks ago, I was informed in another constructive drinking session that the person who sat next to the door and usually also across from the host – which usually, is also the most

important person – was supposed to be the one with the lowest seniority. So I paid particular attention to that position, trying to test the new knowledge I had just learned. As expected, the person who – according to her self-introduction – had entered the bureau most recently, I observed, also seemed to be the youngest among them and on her own initiative chose the lowest-level position. Next to her was the entrepreneur friend of my introducer. Though he was the elite in his area and probably even elder than our host, he still chose the last but one place. I supposed that keeping a modest attitude and low profile was the best choice for him for he was there to ask for help.

Then I started to wonder about my position within this circle. Honestly, I was secretly delighted for at least I was not the person who sat in the “worst” place. This might be attributed to two reasons. Firstly, my introducer was also quite prestigious among that group and as his guest I benefited more or less from the association with him. Another reason was that the only thing I was hoping for was to take a look at their daily life. I did not have any concrete expectations from them so that there was no particular reason for me to emphasise the power relation. Even if we wanted to, neither side of us knew which criterion should be referred to. So at the very beginning, the best choice for me was simply to be a nice guest. However, what happened next proved me wrong. I was still too naïve to think that I could be an exception. The atmosphere of tension never let up and no one acted naturally until I started to take the task seriously of showing my willingness to connect myself to the exchange network and prove my awareness of the corresponding obligation. The reflection on this experience directly sheds light on the puzzle of why corruption appears to be “unavoidable.” What is unavoidable is exchange practice – of which a corrupt transaction is only an alternative expressive tool – endowed with symbolic meanings. They are not only credentials for entering into a network but also the proof of being able to stick to the commitment and the foundation for further reciprocal cooperation. Moreover, through selecting the counterpart, means, and objects of exchange, people identify their mutual relationship within the group and the concrete context.

After everyone settled down, the host briefly greeted his old friends one by one again, and then the dinner began. I noticed that the host deliberately avoided talking to the entrepreneur friend of my introducer and me. I thought that he might not know that we were also coming, so I asked my introducer. But my introducer told me that he already informed the host that he would bring two friends to the get-together. In this case, I supposed the host already knew

some basic information about us and the reason why we were there. But from his indifferent attitude and critical glances towards us – especially me – I felt obvious doubt and even a little bit of hostility. I did not quite understand why he would feel that at the moment. But a few days later, I was finally enlightened when I talked about my experience of that day to another interviewee and asked him to help me to interpret the intentions of the host. This senior public officer told me that, as far as he could see, the “big brother” was intentionally playing a straight face for two reasons. The first one was that he did not know me well so that to keep a distance was quite natural. But a more important reason was that our host was trying to awe the newcomers. There was no reason for the host to hate me. Nevertheless, he still projected a commanding image to imply to the newcomers that we should figure out who the boss was and know our places. This intriguing finding supported my hypothesis. Before entering the field, I had always wondered if the routinisation of corruption has more to do with general principles of how human society is constructed and functions rather than any particular institutional design or conventions. When people encounter concrete social interactions, there is always a hidden force pushing them to abide by certain pragmatic but not necessarily formally-coded rules. And this force asserts its influence through a set of devices such as the role of the “big brother” in every group. Based on this finding, I further infer that the crux of explaining the routinisation of corrupt exchange lies in identifying the hidden force that underpins the cooperative interaction among individual social subjects as well as the informal institutions working with such forces.

Back to the course of the event. Shortly after everyone briefly ate something and recovered a bit from the whole day’s work, the senior officer sitting next to the host started the first ritual – making a toast. Since the table was round, they naturally took their turn one by one. I noticed that there were two salient features which made their toasts different from common toast-making as we have in ordinary get-togethers. Firstly, they seemed to feel obliged to do so, which was signified by their unnatural body language and incoherent words. The young officer who sat next to the door even stammered. She seemed to be extremely nervous. This also, to a large extent, implied that they were not “close friends” as they had asserted, for talking in front of friends would not make people feel uneasy. Secondly, their toasts were all quite long and repetitive. To my surprise, none of them talked about a delightful mood or offered good wishes. Instead, everyone expended huge effort in expressing their sense of identity to the group and their respect for the host. At one moment, I even felt personally that

the situation got a little bit awkward because people tried so hard to confess their affection for their colleagues and the group that they even used up their vocabulary. They ended up repeating the same set of words mechanically and reluctantly.

One more detail also raised my attention. Though they kept emphasising that they were very close to each other, none of them ever mentioned any concrete experience that could prove such closeness. On the contrary, all of them phrased their speeches in a relatively vague and abstract way. In this sense, the meaning conveyed through their discourse was “we should stay close” rather than “we are close,” which means their declaration of friendship manifested itself more like a manifesto instead of reflecting reality. Their action was not so much an expression of authentic good feelings through toasting but with creating an image in front of the group that they had good feelings for each other. The contradictory part about this confessing of loyalty was that while they did their best to show their “friendship” to each other, but what they did was not out of friendship at all, because real friends neither needed to emphasise how close they were through ritualised words nor would care about the official hierarchy.

During the whole process of the round toast-making, our “big brother” never talked but had been listening very carefully to everyone’s words with his eyes closed and arms crossed. In fact, from the very beginning until the end of the constructive drinking session, he maintained just such a gesture throughout. Only when he intended to judge or correct anything, would he half-open his eyes and say something in an unhurried, commanding, and sometimes threatening tone. He was the one who did the least talking of all the participants. Even I spent more time socialising than he did. But the thing was, he did not need to talk. In other words, the reason why he was there was not to socialise or to build up his good reputation, for he already had successfully done that. Neither did he go there to offer help to anyone and assist them in fulfilling certain goals. Instead, the reason he had to be invited – as my introducer implied to me at the very beginning – was that he played a role as a symbol, a bond of the group, as well as a judge or supervisor. People respected him because he had the widest connections and the most powerful influence among the circle, achievements that could be attributed to his great capability of manipulating personal relationships. A group needs a coordinator just as performance needs a director, and the “big brother” bears this function. His presence guaranteed an ordered situation, namely everyone identifying their position within the group correctly and performing in accordance with the commonly accepted manner. In

other words, his job was to prevent the performance from being disrupted by anyone who did not follow the rules.

Speaking of the rules, as the toasting ritual went on, I started to feel a little tense because I did not know how I should behave. I also wished to adapt to their rules but had no idea how. The entrepreneur friend of my introducer expressed his gratitude to my introducer, which was also sensible for the occasion. But I was neither a close friend of my introducer nor did I want to ask for any favour from them – maybe the fact that I wanted to observe their life could be seen as one, but this was still different from what our entrepreneur friend expected from them. My introducer was very thoughtful. When the female officer sitting next to me finished her toast, he quickly took over my turn. At the end of his toast, he introduced me again, in passing.

A few days later when I transcribed my diary of this constructive drinking session, I realised that I had made a mistake there. I should immediately and explicitly have let them – especially the “big brother” – know that I appreciated the help from my introducer and all of the others, no matter whether they were willing to do so or not, and no matter whether they did really help or not. What’s more, I was also supposed to show full respect to the “big brother.” But I did not. I thought since my introducer did all the talking and that I did not have to waste their time, so I just briefly said hello again. I always found talking too much to be a problem, but I did not know that sometimes talking too little could also be a problem, especially when it was seen as part of a routine that bears certain symbolic meaning. This negligence made the whole procedure of blending in their circle tortuous for me. However, from another side, it was also the obstacle caused by my ignorance that finally enlightened me and prompted me to think about the foundations for social interaction and to comprehend certain behaviours including corruption in terms of their symbolic meaning. My personal experience illustrated the process of how an outsider was absorbed into a network by performing a variety of patterned behaviours to express the recognition of the rational voids of the group and in turn became recognised by the other members.

When I was rejoicing secretly and presupposing that the “test” was finally over, the female officer sitting next to me probably noticed the quizzical expression on my face. She then talked to me in a very low voice:

A typical after-work drinks among us who work in government agencies is just like this. Everyone has to talk a lot of empty beautiful words and to propose many toasts. In fact, at

least for me, it is a burden, but I have to follow this rule because if everybody else does while I don't, I will have no chance to be promoted or even not be able to conduct my daily job. The others might have the same feeling, but no one would speak it out because we don't know how to stop it, and we get all that we want from it.

And then, to my surprise, right after saying the above words of complaint to me, she immediately changed her facial expression from one of reluctance to an incomparably sincere one with a large smile. She turned to the "big brother" and said to him:

Your support is very important to me. There are still a lot of things that I need to learn. I will be very appreciative if you could give me some more guidance.

The performance of this young officer revealed a rich meaning. She behaved in a self-contradictory way. But we should take her behaviour as a performer diligently playing her roles rather than as her lying. Therefore, evaluation should be made from the perspective of whether she did the appropriate thing instead of whether what she said was true. She told me her personal feelings as an insider, to some extent a friendly elder stranger. While the words she said to the "big brother" were what she ought to say. She expressed her feeling about the social gathering euphemistically by indicating that this was only her personal opinion, but I was sure that she was definitely not the only one who felt tired of such activity. Referring to my own experience, having attended such get-togethers only a few times had already made me feel exhausted, not to mention that I was only an observer, an outsider who did not have as much pressure and obligation as the insiders. I could imagine how they felt when they had to cope with this type of socialising activity almost every day. People had to pay attention to the hidden meaning behind every subtle facial expression and every word uttered by others. Therefore, I was always curious about why people still frequently and constantly initiated and participated in such activities, even though they felt tired of them.

Showing respect to the "big brother" and all the other members of the group in an exaggerated or a rather pretentious way was not meaningless at all, because what they were doing was not simply showing their sense of belonging to the group out of a psychology of conformity, which is what it superficially looked like. Instead, through a stylised performance of confessing loyalty, what they intended to do was prove their sensibility. In other words, they wanted to show to each other that they were trustworthy cooperators in terms of accepting the existing consensus and being fully aware of their positions within the group. The consensus refers to certain commonly accepted values, rational voids the validity of which no one would question. As Goffman's theory indicates, the most important foundation for the smooth-running of cooperative interaction is a common idealised view of the situation. The "big

brother” was not only a supervisor but also the embodiment of all the existing consensus, so that to show respect to him was also to show respect to the premise of cooperation. And this is why the young officer said they got everything from the seemingly boring rules, as essentially they could achieve nothing without cooperation, and cooperation must be built upon all members’ recognition of the existing consensus conveyed through ritualised performance. The key point was not whether you truly believed in this consensus of values or not, but that you make an impression on your counterparts or audience that you will abide by them. And this constitutes the foundation for all further cooperative interaction.

The following action of the officer sitting next to me further exemplified how people consolidated interpersonal connections by intentionally creating certain impressions. She half-jokingly asked the “big brother” to introduce her to a possible boyfriend if he noticed any appropriate person. I did not quite understand why she would raise such a topic at a public occasion and thought about this question for a long time. I felt confused not only because the boyfriend issue was private but more because, as I made more contact with and gradually got more familiar with her, I noted that she was rather satisfied with her life and apparently not a person who yearned for a relationship or marriage. She even told me that she enjoyed single life very much. Then I realised that she asked help from the “big brother” about a personal issue not because she really wanted him to introduce anyone to her but to consolidate their relationship by creating an impression that she took him not only as a predecessor in work but also a parent-like close elder friend with whom she was willing to share her worries and even secrets.

The “big brother” seemed to be satisfied with her performance and said to her with a father-like countenance: “You are a sensible (*Dongshide*) child. I know that.” Right after the young officer successfully expressed her loyalty and, speaking of “*Dongshide*” (sensible), another person who sat across from me picked up the big brother’s words and made a speech about how important he thought being “*Dongshide*” was and how he would define success:

I think whether your life is successful or not should not be judged by whether you work hard, or whether you could afford all you want, but should be judged by whether you can get along very well with all kinds of people around you, whether you are sensible [*Dongshide*] enough. Being successful simply means having a lot of friends.

The Chinese term “*Dongshide*” or “*Dongshi*” is an adjective denoting a subtle connotation. It is quite difficult to find a counter term for it in English. It is an adjective denoting a similar meaning to the term sensible, thoughtful or obedient. But in essence, it is used to describe a

person who knows his or her place or situation, namely the mutual relations between him- or herself with the other persons as well as his or her obligations entailed by corresponding social roles. In other words, if a person is capable of accurately understanding what the situation demands of him or her, then we can say that he or she is “*dongshide*.” “*Dong*” means “understand,” and “*shi*” – with a literal meaning of “the thing” – means a variety of things centering around certain situations. Referring to Goffman’s dramaturgical view of social life, we might describe “*dongshide*” person as a dedicated performer who can always capture an accurate, thorough understanding of his or her roles on different kinds of stages and sophisticatedly invokes performing skills to create the ideal characters. This might explain why the female officer said to me that she took socialising to be a burden, for she needed to deliberate the expectations from people around her all the time. Otherwise, she might probably not be able to get along well in the environment, which is to say, could not achieve what she wanted.

In short, the core necessity for being a good performer, namely “*dongshide*,” is knowing the situation. It does not necessarily mean that we should do the same thing whatever the other people do but means fulfilling the audience’s expectations and making them feel comfortable with our behaviour.

This officer’s theory of success reminded me of a story I had heard from several other interviewees about a “miserable” colleague of theirs. Once when I asked several cadres about how they discerned their identity at a brief lunch on a weekday, they mentioned the career path of a colleague who used to work with them and then was transferred to another section. According to their description, this colleague was a very strong-minded person, he often raised questions about his superior’s decisions, or made suggestions and pointed out his peers’ mistakes in work. His superiors did not like him and often intentionally assigned him impossible jobs to do. His colleagues also did not like him because they thought he was showing off so that they isolated him. Finally, he got very depressed and changed his working style. He stopped talking, behaved like everyone else, no questions, no differences, then he even got a promotion. I did not know whether his questions and suggestions were reasonable or not, but what I do know for sure is that actually he did have such a right to talk and was theoretically obliged to supervise each other’s behaviour with his peers. According to the Civil Servant Law of the PRC, public officials may give suggestions to their superiors if they think the order is wrong, and if they execute orders that are obviously against the law they

could also be held legally responsible.¹²⁷ However, this cadre's unique logic of behaviour alienated him from his peers. I still remember the disgruntled look on his ex-colleagues' faces. One of them said "who did he think he was? He just did not understand his position. He was no different from us." This person might have been behaving in an annoying way but he did not do anything substantially wrong. He was marginalised by his superiors and colleagues, not because of his independence and integrity but because he made people around him uncomfortable by dogmatically sticking to one set of idealised views and neglecting the other principles of social life. He could be conceived of as a decent public officer, but at the same time also a whistleblower and megalomaniac. His biggest mistake was when everyone else tried to stay low-key and find a background for harmonious cooperation, he was always trying to break this balance. When people emphasise the importance of getting along well within the environment, they are not just talking about giving beautiful speeches in a hypocritical way, but implicating that we always need to fulfil our duties and goals in a proper way in terms of being justifiable to others.

Pausing for a while, the officer who had just talked about his understanding of being successful continued his speech. It seemed that he wanted to give an example by referring to his personal experience. He then said to us ostentatiously:

Today, those people from the local Party Discipline Inspecting Committee came to my department, and they were very polite to me. They were. They better be polite, this is my place. I have a good relationship with everyone here. There is nothing about me that could be criticised.

By emphasising that he had many good friends in the department, he was implying that he was a typically successful person according to his standards. He repeated several times that the discipline inspecting officers should be polite to him that I cannot help wondering if the inspecting officers were not polite to him, what he would do to them. In this sense, he seemed to be talking big. The reason that he was safe could only be that he did not do anything wrong. The hidden information he tried to implicate was that no one could frame him, and he attributed this to his good reputation. His words sounded contradictory because if he did his job well and complied with discipline, why would he need any extra support from his friends?

¹²⁷ Article 54 of the PRC's civil servant law states that a civil servant may put forward his suggestions of rectifying or withdrawing his or her superior's decision or command if he or she considers it as improper. If the superior insists on his decision, the command shall be executed and the superior undertakes the responsibility. But if a civil servant executes an obvious illegal, he or she shall also be held responsible according to the law. http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2005-06/21/content_8249.htm

Moreover, why would he expect the officers from the discipline inspecting committee to be polite to him, for their job was supposed to be to implement strict supervision of cadres? It appeared to me that because of the existence of social role relevant rational void with the appreciation of personal sentiment, the original intention of discipline inspection – that is, to strengthen the party’s construction through supervision – is distorted in daily practice. The question of whether a cadre has made a mistake or violated any discipline has been unwittingly replaced by whether this cadre has offended anyone or whether he or she is good at manipulating networks. When considering the daily context, cadres are not just elements of the CPC and state authority but also friends or competitors, superiors, and subordinates to each other. Their behaviour is not just determined by orthodox ideas such as impartiality and loyalty to the party organisation but also by personal emotion. Everything is more or less about power struggle and manipulation of interpersonal networks. As revealed by the above words of a local official, the evaluation of one cadre depends on their popularity rather than working ability. If one cadre is outstanding in work while has not paid enough attention to dealing with interpersonal relationships, he or she might become unpopular or even marginalised.

An intriguing finding of my fieldwork in both city groups of central Liaoning and the Chongqing municipality also revealed the influence of personal sentiment, which was the over-politicisation of the ongoing anti-corruption effort. Cadres took personal influence based on interest exchange and emotional connections as one of the most important forms of capital and even the “shield” protecting them not only from malicious attacks but sometimes even legitimate investigation. An interviewee had informed me about his personal experience during the period when the party discipline inspecting team was stationed in his sector for a routine review. He told me that the inspecting team set up a mailbox in the building to collect opinions and reports of discipline violations from the staff of the target sector. A few days later, the inspecting committee received many reports accusing others of discipline violations. After careful investigation most accusations were revealed to be false or deliberately exaggerated. But one thing is for sure, these letters all came from people inside the target sector. People even took activities as serious as discipline inspection as a chance to take down their competitors or people they disliked. The discipline committee harshly criticised such a practice at the closing meeting before they left.

After showing off about his successful life, this officer turned to me, asking me to explain more about my research in a defiant tone:

So, Dr Xiao GE, C [my introducer] told us that you would come, but I still did not quite understand your research, what kind of statistics do you need? We have disciplines, you know? It depends.

He deliberately addressed me in a taunting way. By drawing out the pronunciation of the term “Doctor” (*Boshi*), he seemed to be playing “polite,” but his exaggerated facial expression and tone indicated the opposite meaning. At such a casual occasion, people usually do not address each other by official or academic title, so by intentionally calling me doctor he highlighted the distance between them and me. He was trying to emphasise the formal roles of each side and at the same time implied that they neither have any further private connection nor know much about me so that they were not obliged to offer me any help. This was proven by the words that followed reminding me of the existence of disciplines. According to my experience, every time they used the cliché that the discipline forbids this and that – which is usually what I asked them about – they were not really complying with the discipline but only finding a high-sounding excuse. The sub-textual meaning was actually “the discipline did not regulate that I must help you, which means I could also interpret it as the discipline forbidding me from helping you, so that even if you are unsatisfied with this it is not my problem.” Moreover, in Chinese, “Xiao” means young or little, so calling someone by “Xiao X” (this person’s family name) could convey two different meanings according to the context. The first meaning is to express kindness and a caring sentiment, which is often used by elders or superiors when they address younger people or subordinates. But under certain circumstances, using such a form of address could also convey a condescending, mocking attitude towards the person being addressed. And I was obviously experiencing the latter situation. As long as I realised that they were still suspicious of my appearance, I knew I should take this chance to personally explain to them the reason why I was there in a clear and inappropriate way. So I told them:

I was fully aware of your duty and by no means intend to bother you with any presumptuous requests. In fact my research also concerns discipline. I was always told that the reality was not as simple as what I had learned in books, especially when it comes to some complicated phenomena such as corruption. I do not think I need any specific statistics. Rather, it would be very helpful if I could gain an intuitive feeling about your daily life and your opinions about hot issues. It would be appreciated if you could talk with me about what you think is important and difficult about being a cadre, how you balance public and private roles, and how you discern corruption and anti-corruption.

I knew that I must honestly introduce my research even though corruption was a very sensitive topic, especially for those cadres. Therefore, I decided to tell them my research interest directly but at the same time emphasising two things to let them feel safe instead of threatened. The first point was that I did not intend to pry into any sensitive statistics, so that they did not need to fear any risk of leaking secrets of either their departments or the party organisation. The second thing was that by indicating that I was lacking knowledge about their life and very willing to stay open to their opinions and suggestions, I conveyed a modest attitude that I was not there to make any judgment but to listen and learn from them. I tried to make it clear that I was interested in the corruption phenomenon but had no pre-assumptions or stereotypical thoughts about them. Instead, I respected their effort and feelings. As expected, the atmosphere became less tense, and he said:

Well, I knew quite a few scholars, they usually inquired of me about concrete statistics. But you are different. What is so fun about our daily life? We are just common people. But now I am sure that you are not a spy. Hahaha.

This time his tone became much less aggressive. I could see that he was listening and thinking about my words seriously. Since he was convinced that I would not cause any trouble, he withdrew the pretentious, arrogant attitude and started to talk in a normal way. His joke about spying and his laughter sounded a little bit unnatural or regretful. I interpreted it as him trying to make a tacit apology for his previous scoffing words. Right after he said the above, the senior officer sitting next to the “big brother” picked up on the dialogue. I had met this officer earlier in that day and we got along quite well. He had a very good impression of me. Besides, he was the best friend of my introducer. He apparently felt the tension just now and tried to help me out and ease the atmosphere. He said:

I had a long talk with Little GE today, she is a very modest and diligent child. I also think that her research is quite interesting because she has a unique perspective towards corruption in our country. She does not take a simple black-and-white view to see the world. She just wanted to have more empirical experience in real life. Nothing else.

This officer addressed me as Little GE in a nice way to indicate that he was rather familiar with me. And by calling me a “child,” he stressed another dimension of the relationship between them and me, which was, they were all elders to me, and I was just a child who was still struggling with my school work and would cause no harm to anyone. In this sense, whether they helped me or not was not simply decided by their official role but also influenced by personal sentiment. More importantly, he guaranteed my character to his colleagues, assuring them that I knew my manner and helping me would not be a bad choice.

Just when I felt that I could finally relax, the “big brother” who was always silently listening to the whole conversation suddenly started talking. He turned to me – but still kept his eyes half-closed – and said the following words in a commanding tone:

I did not have to come to meet you. But this is my friend’s request. I must not refuse. He gathered us here to help you with your research. You should be grateful to him because he is helping you by using up his own credit.

His words implied two levels of meaning. Firstly, he took himself and my introducer as examples to illustrate how important it is to be grateful and to treasure personal sentiment between friends. He did not have to come, but he still came, not because of me but because he was my introducer’s friend. His decision indicated how symbolic meaning behind a social activity helps to maintain the functioning of cooperative interaction. Superficially he was there to help me, but essentially he did this to express his affection to his friend – my introducer, and by doing this, their friendship could be consolidated. As for my introducer, he sacrificed his own credit by taking the cost of owing his friends more favours to help me because he treasured his friendship with me. Otherwise, he would not do this for a stranger. Another level of meaning behind his words was conveyed graphically by the term “credit.” By using this term he implied that friendship was one thing, but exchange was another. Even between friends, there was still an issue of credit. In other words, as friends, they were obliged to help each other, but as rational or economic subjects, this favour-exchange must also be mutual and equivalent. As I intended to join the network of exchange and get their help, I should also be aware of this. In other words, he wanted me to know that personal commitment determined that I got a chance to join them, but what results I could get depended on how I performed. If I was a person who knew how to appreciate and pay back the favour, then I could also be their friend; and if I was not, then they would not help me, and without any feeling of guilt. My introducer might have felt that the “big brother’s” attitude was rather harsh, so he said to me that: “Oh... You don’t need to thank me; I just did what a friend should do...” But the big brother immediately interrupted him by saying

There is no “should-do.” People should not take their friends’ help for granted.

Here he again emphasised the principle of equivalent exchange. And I knew that the whole dialogue that had just taken place was actually a “lesson” they would teach any newcomer no matter if it was me or a young officer who had just started his or her career, or an ordinary person who needed their help. The core issue was not whether I was truly an honest or grateful person or not, but whether I could show them know that I would be compliant with

the existing rational voids. If I could not, our interaction would just stop here. I knew I did not have any other choice – though I myself would not expect any payback when helping my friends, and I also thought that even though paying a favour back was necessary in some circumstances, it did not have to be done in such an obvious and anxious way – so I decided to join the game, and be a good performer. Besides, I believed that it was time to end all these sounding-out tricks and their doubts. Then I also invoked their institution, gave an affectionate, long speech which I was supposed to do at the very beginning. I intentionally adjusted my address to them from the official title to a more intimate mode such as Uncle C (my introducer) and sister G (the young female officer who sat next to me):

I am not a talkative person. But it does not mean that I am ungrateful. I hope you do not get me wrong. Of course, I sincerely appreciate the help from not only Uncle C but from all of you. Just now I had a very pleasant talk with Sister G. I have learnt a lot of things that I did not have the chance to know at school. I cannot finish my research without your support. But I hope that I can become a friend instead of just a researcher to you; I also hope that this will not be the last and the only time we meet each other. I take this city as home and you all as family. I know that what I could do for you might be very limited, but I would be very glad to help whenever you need me.

Here my introducer quickly gave me a poke and hinted to me: “So if they go to Germany sometime, you could... ?” I immediately got his meaning and replied: “Yes, I would be very glad to be your guide. Please do not hesitate to contact me anytime.”

Honestly, I really appreciated all of my introducer’s assistance. He even helped me to make my promise more concrete. In such a stressful context and under many suspicious eyes I myself could barely think of anything I could use to exchange with them. Luckily, my speech worked. Since I addressed all the things they expected me to know, I observed a dramatic change in their attitude towards me. Clearly, the turnaround in their attitude towards me was motivated by my performance in confirming my willingness to comply with their view of the situation. The tense atmosphere was finally broken by my touching words – at least I thought they were. The “big brother’s” face revealed a look of satisfying. And he never said anything since then. Even my introducer breathed a sigh of relief. He whispered to me: “I am proud of you. I thought you wouldn’t make it, but you just did a great job! You gave a very infectious statement!”

The most obvious and interesting manifestation indicating the change of their attitude towards me was that all of them started to address me as “Little GE” or “Sister Ningjing” (my first name), or just “our little sister.” The officer who started the “interrogation” of me spoke first

after my speech. He said: “OK! No problem! If there is anything I can help our sister with to finish her research, I will try my best.” Then the talking continued, I was still the focus of their conversations but their questions to me became much more private and put aside any doubt about my “hidden” motivation. They asked me how I liked living in Germany, when I planned to graduate, and whether I could teach them some English or German, so on and so forth. Also, they became much more enthusiastic to answer my questions. Later in the rest time of the after-work gathering, I got many chances to join in their conversations and talk with them about how they liked their job, what they thought about the ongoing anti-corruption effort, as well as their private lives. To my surprise, they were not conservative at all and some of them had very insightful opinions about social issues. Equally surprising, the officer who had been acting harshly with me even of his own volition told me that he would go back to his office and see whether he could find any relevant materials for me tomorrow. I could not help wondering that if I had performed more in a more heart-touching manner if he would have revealed some “secret statistics.” His proposal sounded like a reward for my compliance with the rules, and also to give “face” to them. And his action reminded me of the words of another interviewee who had told me: “To be honest, officialdom culture is ultimately about giving face to each other. We keep good communication about what you need and what I need and try our best to do something that would make everyone happy.”

According to Goffman, the smooth running of the performance relies on the existence of a commonly-recognised view of the situation shared by all the performers. This is to say, the cooperative interaction among the participants of a social event needs to be based on their common recognition of certain idealised values that are involved in the situation – no matter whether they truly believe in these values as a sincere performer or not. In essence, to create such consensus, or to produce an impression that all common values are respected and realised constitutes the core mission of the process of rationalisation. This is also how tacit rationality dominates people’s choice-making during social interactions. By invoking common values people do not seek to make a judgment but to prove to each other that they are aware of and recognise the same rational void so that they establish a ground for further cooperation.

My experience of blending into the situation appropriately demonstrated such a consensus-creating process. These public officers did not accept me until I proved my recognition of all the idealised values that they advocated one by one, and this process was naturally promoted

by a sequence of hints or tests from them. Before the officer who gave a speech about the criteria of success – I did not realise that his words were also an implicit message to me until I started to review the whole process of that day carefully – asked me to talk more about my research, the relationship between them and myself was dominated by a defined official view oriented toward the relation between public officers and an ordinary citizen. What he was doing was reminding me that I should be aware of their responsibility to be impartial and prudent. While after the “big brother” explicitly reminded me that I was supposed to be grateful to them, and then I gave my “announcement” that I not only treasured my friendship with them but would also be willing to do give their favour back, I proved to them that I was fully aware of their official obligation, equivalent exchange principle and the sentiment between friends, as well as all my obligations entailed by these values. As I successfully conveyed the impression they needed to see, I was able to achieve a deeper connection with them, which could be seen from their 180-degree turn in their attitude towards me. As long as they knew that I had the same view towards the situation as theirs, they ceased to be aggressive and suspicious. Their official role no longer sustained its dominance; instead, they started to treat me more like one of their own. They started to address me kindly as “Sister GE” or “Little GE” instead of calling me “Dr. GE” in an ironic tone. Meanwhile, by starting real communication, which was to say, exchanging information with me, they tacitly showed their approval of my participation. In this sense, being able to take part in the exchange was the credential of becoming part of the network. But I also knew that whether I could keep my commitment to this small circle – namely whether I really did return favours when they needed me – would determine whether they decided to carry out further cooperation with me in the future.

The Ritual of Exchange

The second ritual was staged after everyone’s position – including mine – was settled. All participants gradually split into small groups and exchanged favours according to each person’s specific needs. Their requests to each other included all sorts of things, from asking for coordination in routine works which were supposed to be done without particular requests, to extremely private issues that seemed to be out of reach of colleagues. The most intriguing part about the ritual of exchange was not what they wanted from each other but how they sophisticatedly invoked commonly-accepted values to endorse their requests and realised them successfully. In other words, the crux of understanding the necessity of ritualised

exchange as an important ingredient of the informal institution lies in figuring out their symbolic meaning in concrete contexts. This entails a close examination of how people totalise different sets of social relations and accordingly select their counterpart, means, and object of favour-exchange.

The legitimacy of an action within a concrete context is thus not determined by whether it complies with specific legal or moral ethics but rests on its symbolic meaning, namely how people interpret it given their roles and mutual obligations at that very moment. Accordingly, whether people participate in or reject certain action does not depend on whether it is corrupt or not-corrupt in terms of formally-defined criteria but on whether such action is appropriate or not for the particular situation. It is in this sense that corruption is deemed “unavoidable,” as it bears different characters in formally-prescribed laws and daily practice. In terms of the former criterion, it is illicit. While when conceiving it as a symbolic exchange, it is only an alternative expressive tool that shares the same attribute with all the other forms of social exchanges, and which its validity is founded on its compliance with tacit rationality instead of specific ethics.

In the following section, I specifically describe three exchanges I either personally participated in or observed. They are of significance because they are typical and took place respectively among different participants and represent three general types of exchange. The first one was between an officer and myself, the second one among several officers, and the last one involved the entrepreneur and two officers, including my introducer. I was able to audit the last two cases because, on the one hand, the initiators needed support from all the participants in the room, so the conversations were open. On the other hand, the more important reason that they did not intentionally avoid my presence was, they took such practices as completely normal with no need to hide. The entrepreneur even advised me to listen carefully to his story and learn more about real life from his experience.

Exchange case 1

The first exchange I came across was between an officer and myself. He was about forty years old, and a part-time doctoral student majored in economics. Since we were both working on our doctorate, he went to me and asked me about my experience of studying abroad. He told me that due to the disciplinary restriction of his position he could not go abroad freely, and he had always yearned to travel to another country. Therefore, he was very curious about my life

and asked me many questions. I answered them honestly one by one, and later we discussed our respective research and gave each other some suggestions. But I thought the crucial factor that ultimately lessened the distance between him and me was our common experience. When the topic moved to pressure, he told me that he often felt very stressed since he had to take care of his family and at the same time write his dissertation. Moreover, he needed to go to another city to meet his supervisor once a month, and only the time spent on the train would cost him about six hours. He talked for quite a long time, and I guessed that he could hardly find anyone to talk to about such a topic from his daily life.

As a doctoral student studying and living alone in a foreign country, though my life was not the same as his, I understood the feeling of having to face many challenges at the same time. So I did not show any impatience and shared some personal experience about how to deal with pressure. I felt that he was much more relieved after talking to me and also quite delighted that finally his experience resonated with someone else. He told me that he knew how difficult it was to do a Ph.D. and since we were friends already, he would try his best to help me. I felt that he meant it sincerely but in view of the previous experience I still formally expressed my gratitude. I told him that “I really appreciate your help. I could not smoothly complete my research without your support. If you need any help from me in the future, just let me know anytime.” Sure enough, he became even more enthusiastic and at once set up a time with me to visit his office the next day. When we met at the appointed time, he not only introduced his colleague who shared the office with him to me, persuading him to accept my interview, but also gave me some relevant institutional journals for reference. When I went back home, he even drove me to the railway station together with my introducer.

Several weeks later, when I went back to this city for some re-interviews, I brought a fine hardcover English book to him as a gift. I did not realise anything inappropriate until we met one of his colleagues in the elevator. It was also the short conversation between the three of us that suddenly inspired me and prompted me to reflect on my own experience of establishing a connection with people from an observer’s view by jumping out of the circle that I had unconsciously blended in to. When I gave this officer the book, he told me that he was so moved. He said it was no big deal to offer me some help so that I did not have to do this. But he could also see from this gift that I was a grateful person and valued our friendship. Then the official time was over, and we left the building together. When stepping into the elevator we came across one of his colleagues whose office is upstairs. This colleague right away saw

the book in his hand and asked: “What a nice book! It must be expensive. Where did you get it?” He turned to me and said to his colleague: “I helped my friend with her research, and she gave it to me as a thank-you gift.” Then his colleague’s words shocked me: “Eh? Isn’t that bribery? So you are corrupt! Be careful of the discipline committee guys. Haha.” His colleague was obviously joking, but I still noticed an awkward look flash across on my friend’s face. I did not know how to react but could only say to them: “Well, it was not that expensive, just a common book.” After saying that, I also felt my own words to be a feeble effort at concealment that was better not to have been said. This colleague might also realise that I took his words seriously and this was not what he meant. He did not say anything else with an embarrassed facial expression. We were all silent until got out of the elevator. No one ever mentioned this bad joke afterward. We pretended that it never happened. But I could not stop pondering on the question of how I should define the nature of my behaviour. Was it a bribery-offering or not? If it was not, why should we feel uneasy? If it was, then how did I come to this situation step by step without even any slightest doubt? This question might probably perplex my new public officer friend also.

When talking about “unavoidable” corruption, for most of the time we as common people do not refer to political corruption or serious economic crime but rather the petty type of corrupt transaction practices. What people complain about is the atmosphere that all things have to be done through a network established upon interpersonal connections and a series of correspondingly informal institutionalised procedures. But when we condemn corruption in an abstract sense, we hardly notice that we might already be involved ourselves in quasi-corrupt exchanges and are the creators of the atmosphere that we criticise. This is because the symbolic meaning behind certain social actions is often interpreted differently in terms of certain concrete contexts and abstract formally-prescribed rules. As in this case, strictly speaking, people could define it as corruption. We could interpret it as an illicit exchange between public office and bribery. This officer mobilised his public power to help a person who offered him a gift to do her research. However, if we review the process of the whole exchange, we would find out that no one intentionally sought any illicit gain at the very beginning. What I wanted was to conduct field research while the officer might just need a friend who could share some experience with him. To make the cooperation possible, we had to show each other that we had consensus on how things should go between our interactions. This means that we ought to prove that we would abide by certain idealised values. In this

sense, our actions are value-related. But it can be noted that we complied with – or showed compliance with – common values not for the sake of these values themselves, or in other words, not necessarily because we sincerely believed in them but because abiding by commonly-accepted values was the premise for the smooth-running of the subsequent cooperative interaction. In this case, though I did not feel it quite necessary to emphasise the equivalent exchange principle and how I treasured the sentiment between friends all the time, I still uttered it, and as soon as I did this my counterpart felt more reassurance and became more enthusiastic. All these performances engendered a commitment that we had to stick to in the future, otherwise our connection would break if anyone of us let another down. It is a chain reaction, and the environment decides whether you join in and once you are in you cannot get out unless you want to cease the cooperation.

This also explained the symbolic meaning of my gift. I gave it to him to express that I was committed to the equivalent exchange principle and kept my friend in mind because he promised to help me. However, gift exchange did not make our relationship a purely private one, which specifically manifested in another detail, namely how he selected the object of exchange. The relevant official documents he gave to me were all published several years ago. He told me that he could not show me the most updated internal materials because he was obliged to hold on to them as a CPC member. From this we could see that personal interest could be part of the motivation behind an action, but of itself it does not prove its legitimacy or validity. Whether certain interests can be achieved or to what extent it can be fulfilled ultimately depends on its accordance with tacit rationality. To conclude, the whole process of how people choose their counterpart, the means, and the object of exchange is a process of trade-off among different idealised views and expectations. A gift often means more than a gift per se but is rather the carrier of certain information as the foundation of cooperative interaction.

Exchange case 2

The second exchange did not seem to be pre-planned but more like a young officer taking this after-hours socialising as a chance to canvass support or opinion. Not long after the social event proceeded into the second stage, the young officer sitting next to the door stood up and told all of us that she wanted to say something. The intriguing part of her behaviour was that she did not solicit help directly but started by looking back on the tough days when she had

first come to this city and all the help these colleagues had given her then. Since I did not know beforehand that there was an on-going promotion election in their department and she was one of the candidates, I was confused by her roundabout way of talking, wondering about her purpose until she euphemistically brought up her request at last. She said:

When I came to this city, I did not know anybody, and I was desperately lonely and helpless. But you made me feel that I have a family here. Especially Brother X and Sister D. This time, I also need your support, please give me a hand no matter how.

His colleagues replied:

No problem, we are all brothers and sisters, even if you do not say it out, we will also support you. Besides, you are competent for that position, and we know that...

The “big brother” also spoke for her:

She is a good child, always willing to give generous help to others. We all saw that. This is an important chance for her, and we should all support her.

Canvassing is expressly prohibited by the CPC. According to party discipline, it could be categorised as one form of “non-organisational activities” (*feizuzhi huodong*) which refers to all behaviour that violate the party’s organisational discipline. The brochure of CPC discipline published by Fang Zheng Press interprets organisational discipline as all norms and rules set to regulate the relationship between different levels of the party organisation, between the party and its cadres, as well as between individual cadres. In short, the organisational discipline is a complex of rules regulating behaviour within the party organisation. Its core spirit is that all cadres must obey and be loyal to the centre party committee. Theoretically, all factional practices should be illicit, while in daily practice, hidden rules still dominate many cadres’ political lives, which even leads to the phenomenon of adverse selection. The promotion of a cadre is to a large extent dependent on his or her “skills” in manipulating personal networks and of gaining attachment to small groups instead of working ability and his or her loyalty to the Party. Along with the routinisation of interpersonal favour exchange, corruption has also been normalised and often deemed as a “credential of joining the game” as well as the tool for controlling members of small circles. The frequent occurrence of group corruption (*tafangshi fubai*) confirms this inference. Such unhealthy political ecology drives people to do anything to consolidate what they have and produces a side effect of comparable and malignant competition. In official discourse, the party attributes the unhealthy tendency in the realm of officialdom to the permeation of backward values prevalent in society and tends to blame that for the poor self-cultivation of individual cadres. But when we examine non-

organisational activities such as canvassing within concrete contexts, we see that the mechanism underlying the persistence of these informal practices appears to be more complicated than the formal explanation.

The CPC has set a rather high standard for its cadres, but how to achieve all the demands are seldom discussed in terms of a pragmatic view. This makes the party's high expectation of its cadres more like an ultimate ideal, an abstract direction of efforts that is far away from real life instead of an operative work brief for daily practice. Underlying the gap between high expectations and real practice lies the tension between the political role and the social role of the cadres, which has been ever-present but brought out more prominently by the thorough anti-corruption effort. As elements of state authority, CPC cadres are expected to be loyal to the party, the country, and the people they serve, but not to any individual or small circle. As members of a group, the cadres are also colleagues, teammates, competitors, superiors, subordinates as well as friends to each other. The former role claims impartiality, integrity and selflessness while the latter role requires an emotional connection, competition, and constant exchange of favours. The key to explaining the routinisation of corrupt transactions as well as the adverse selection within officialdom is to understand their symbolic meanings.

As demonstrated by this case, when coming to a concrete context, the election did not just represent a process through which the party selects the most competent cadre to serve the country and the people but also an occasion for these colleagues to test each other's character and the closeness of their cooperative relationships. The "big brother's" words conveyed a subtle implication when he suggested that all the people should support the young officer, as he stressed the word "should," which infused a judgment into the choice of those present. Considered together with his emphasis on the merit of the young officer who needed their votes, the meaning of the vote transcended its original purpose. Thus, whether they voted for this young colleague or not was not only about whether they thought she was competent for the position or not but also about whether they supported a grateful, warm-hearted person or not and whether they were willing to return the favours this young officer had given them before. In this sense, "voting for her or not" within this context represented more than a simple judgment on her working ability but was an examination for all these colleagues, a test to see if they advocated the idealised values claimed by the role as friend and if they were willing to act with gratitude. People would find it hard to refuse the request under such a situation, for no one wanted to be condemned for being cold-blooded and ungrateful and

could lose access to the source exchange within the circle for this. Thereby, the influence of the official role was tacitly weakened, and partial election became a means by which people express their recognition of certain common values to sustain cooperation within the group.

Exchange case 3

The last exchange I attended took place between my introducer's entrepreneur friend and the senior officer who had sat next to the "big brother." Before we came to the restaurant, the entrepreneur had already told us about his trouble. He was a real estate developer and recently got into an economic dispute with the construction company to which he outsourced some projects. This company embezzled the project funds and demanded a duplicate payment. After the requirement had been rejected, the owner of the construction company hired some local unemployed people to make trouble in the construction site. They did not destroy anything but sat on the ground all day long so that the project could not continue. The policemen refused to help by asserting that an economic dispute was beyond their jurisdiction and nobody was hurt. While the administrative governor was also reluctant to do any coordinating work because the owner of the construction company was a high-level officer's son. Besides, in the end, to remove this hired gang still required police assistance. It seemed that the only way left was to initiate a lawsuit. But the defendant put word out that he was well-connected and would certainly win any lawsuit. Therefore, my introducer brought his entrepreneur friend here to meet the officer mentioned above who was in charge of some local economic affairs, to try to get some official support.

As with the other favour-asking behaviour, their conversation also did not come straight to the point. As I observed, neither the person requesting nor the person being asked ever directly express their willingness or answers not because they are shy but because they go through a process of sounding out. This is due to the fact that people do not regard exchange as just being exchange. The purpose of such a strategy was not only to see whether the deal could be concluded but more about making a mutual assessment of each other's personal character. This process is very subjective. The requested side could either turn down the favour being asked for just because they do not like the person making the request even if the exchange may bring him or her large benefits, or they may agree to help even knowing that there would be only a little or no reward. Ultimately, how they come to their decisions about whether one another seems to be a trustworthy partner is based on the quality of their performance.

Specifically speaking, people made judgments of their potential cooperators based on whether they abide by rational voids – certain commonly-accepted idealised values, or to be more accurate, whether they successfully create the impression that they are compliant with existing common values.

As for this case, the first contact between our entrepreneur friend and the officer started with talking about their families. The entrepreneur was not a talkative person. With a heavy look on his face, he kept smoking while talking. Luckily they found a common topic: they both have a “disappointing” child who makes them worried. The entrepreneur told us about how he started his business, saying that he had always been law-abiding and hard-working:

I never played tricks to earn filthy lucre; all I want is just to save more money for my son. He is not a talented child, I always have to do this and that for him, but I hope he will at least be an honest person.

He turned to the officer: “You know, it is never easy for us parents.” His words seemed to touch something in the officer’s mind. This officer gave a very short response with a sigh: “I understand.” The entrepreneur continued to say that,

I am also generous to my friends and subordinates. The performance bonus of my company is always higher than that of the other companies, and I never turned down any friend’s request for help. I am really confused now. What happened to this society? Why is it so hard to be a good man?

Then the officer started to ask more details about his case. Finally, he said to the entrepreneur:

Bro, you are a nice person. I will try my best to help you. Not just for the sake of C [my introducer], but because I want to be friends with you. I am not just saying it. I mean it. Tomorrow as soon as I go back to the office, I will make phone calls to some relevant people and see what we could do to have this solved legally and reasonably. You take it easy. Everything will be fine.

In China, the government-business relationship manifests a highly-individualised feature. As Zheng (2017) indicates, the interaction between government and entrepreneurs to a large extent depends on the personal connection between individual officers and entrepreneurs instead of the relation between the government and business realm as two holistic entities. This unique government-business relationship, which Zheng describes as the “Jianghu” network, is established and sustained through constant “exchanges of favours, emotions, and resources” (Wang et al. 2014, 498). Such interpersonal exchanges also provide room for corrupt transactions. As stated, the party usually accounts for the collusion between cadres and private entrepreneurs by pointing to the creeping in of commodity exchange principles into political life. Seen from the outside, it is simply a money-for-power transaction between

public officers and businessmen out of greed and low morality. However, we often overlook the contextual factors when concentrating too much on individual motivation. Indeed, in daily practice, we all have goals to pursue, but there are also rules that control the result of our effort. Uncontrolled self-seeking accounts for the general root of all scenarios of corruption but not the routinisation of corrupt practices. The explanation for the latter thus entails examining the symbolic social meaning of each exchange within a concrete context.

The interaction between my introducer's entrepreneur friend and the officer demonstrates a typical example of how an individualised government-business relationship is established and functions under the dominance of a tacit reasoning process. The officer was there for help at his friend's (my introducer) invitation. His presence was motivated mainly by his commitment to his friend. Therefore, his decision to attend the get-together was driven by the need to express that he indeed valued friendship and so to sustain the connection between his friend. Maybe the potential reward he could get was part of the motivation but not the only reason he went there. As the communication between him and the entrepreneur progressed, they gradually confirmed with each other that they were both aware of the obligation entailed by their roles. The entrepreneur highlighted his reputation for good-behaviour to imply that he respected the law and the public duty of the officer, and that he would not ask for any exorbitant favour. By talking about his son, he was also further rationalising his requirement by invoking a common sentiment among all people. Finally, by indicating that he treated his friends well, he was implicitly conveying information that he would appreciate all the help from the officer and be willing to pay it back. As from the officer's side, it was not a suitable occasion to show off his integrity, neither an opportunity to name his price for any rent-seeking. If he offered his help, what he was doing was not only showing politeness to my introducer but rather helping a nice person – a caring father and a trustworthy, generous friend – which appears to be the obligation of any responsible citizen and public officer. Finally, he expressed his compliance with the official role by explicitly indicating that he would help his new friend within the frame of the law. From the view of the entrepreneur, the absence of any symbolic performance might ruin his chance of getting help. For the officer, any untimely lofty behaviour would threaten the good impression of him in his friends' eyes. Moreover, he had to cash in his promise to consolidate his reputation, as he said, he did not just say it but meant it. Therefore, concerning the multiple rational voids within a specific context, an

exchange could be endowed with complicated meanings. And these meanings constitute the source of legitimacy of context-driven corruption.

Explanation: Power in and behind the Justification of Informal institutions, Tacit Rationality and Corruption

The Reinforcement of Informal Institutions: Power in Discourse and Power Behind Discourse

Power relations and power struggles constitute prominent elements of social reality, which concretely manifest themselves in the order of discourse. The central objective of CDA is to critically analyse the relation between power and discourse, namely the power in discourse and power behind discourse. As defined by Fairclough, power in discourse includes “the exercise of power” in “unequal encounters,” where “one participant controls the contributions of others;” and power behind discourse refers to the hidden power “to shape and constitute orders of discourse” (Fairclough 2015, 27). On the one hand, power in discourse reflects the power behind discourse. On the other hand, through managing power in a discourse, people shape and change the structure of power behind discourse, which is to say, the existing social order. This is where an individual subject’s agency or creativity lies. To resolve pragmatic problems means to manage various sorts of power relations of the subject to the world and the others. And the tool, the course as well as the outcome of relation conducting are all embodied in the production of discourse, or the production of semiosis – texts in a broad sense, including not only language but also visual images, gestures, sounds, and so on.

Accordingly, as an organic configuration of routinised semiotic actions, the complex of informal institutions that shares the same structure with corruption could be conceptualised as the result of power struggle or compromise rather than predetermined rules dominated by culture or tradition, or pure tools for achieving utilitarian gains.

As this dissertation intends to illuminate, participants’ compliance with a set of informal operative procedures is a conscious choice in terms of situational context guided by tacit rationality. The reinforcement of informal institutions is not only entailed by people’s substantial goals, but in essence, is a manifestation of the institutional and societal background. Specifically, in our context, it is the result of cadres’ practice of totalising their relations with each other, with ordinary citizens, and with business counterparts, as well as the outcome of the negotiation between the dominant and dominated groups. In a way, the

informal operative system guarantee the smooth-running of cooperative interaction by expressing “the least common multiple” of a pair of idealised views entailed by all power relations involved in the context. The function of informal operative patterns lies in its capacity to situate different power relations entailed by a matrix of institutional constraints so that the subjects do not have to choose between them but can instead partially fulfil all of them according to the specific context. Through a sequence of ritualised procedures, participants manufacture a context-oriented relation between obligations and indebtedness.

The first half of the after-hours session about absorbing new members of a group exemplifies a typical process of encouraging commitment based on totalising. The newcomer could not get access to the exchanges of social resource taken place exclusively among the small group unless he or she connects him- or herself to the group by initiating debt-creating. Such debt must not only be in the name of exchange per se but within the frame built upon the idealised values entailed by all sets of social relations involved in the situation. The guarantee for the successful conducting of favour exchange is generated from such a frame within which all members can interpret each other’s behaviour from a common perspective. As a vital device bearing the task of supervising such a mutual justification process, the “big brother’s” role was quite noticeable. People respected him not because he was the eldest or the richest person in the group but because he was the most well-connected. In other words, his influence endowed him with the authority to make a judgment about whether the other members in the circle have adhered to common values and are committed to his or her obligations. His judgment could also consolidate or destroy the foundation of further cooperation between this person and the other members of the group. Therefore, rather than helping his pals fulfil their goals, the “big brother’s” main responsibility was to make sure that everyone acts in compliance with the rules in the sense of knowing his or her place and committing themselves to the corresponding obligations. The “big brother” never talked to me again after he made sure that I – the newcomer – would not be a rule-breaker.

Finally, the exchange becomes institutionalised action. It is not only the way through which people get access to social resources but also a reflection of social relations and an index of the character of the individual participants in the interaction. Traditionally, scholars have tended to judge the motivation behind exchange behaviour, including corrupt transactions, by focusing on what kind of interests are being served or what external conditions facilitate such practices. But they neglect the symbolic meaning behind social exchanges within concrete

contexts, namely how they are rationalised, which is the determining factor of whether an exchange can be successfully realised. It is no doubt that social exchanges concern interests, but they are also to a large extent about trust and personal character. People only exchange resources with those they believe to be trustworthy, and they make their judgment by assessing whether their potential counterpart in the interaction shares the same mode of interpreting the environment. Moreover, what objects are exchanged and in what means they are exchanged further indicate the relationship between the participants in an interaction. The elements of an exchange practice are not determined by any single moral or political value but by how social subjects trade-off among different roles according to the environment.

As for the second half of the event, the analysis of the three quasi-corrupt exchanges demonstrates how participants select object, means, and counterpart after the general power structure has been settled, as well as the inherent relation between the informal institution and corruption. Corruption appears to be “unavoidable” because a complex of informal behavioural patterns, with the ritualised exchange as a core ingredient through which people get all the social resources they need, is both corruption-inclusive and unavoidable. And the reason why these informal institutions are more effective than the formal ones in daily practice is that they have a larger expressive compatibility for situating social subjects’ different roles into one frame while the formal institutions address only one role. In other words, informal institutions allow a space for people to manipulate, or to trade-off among multiple roles and obligations according to the concrete context. If the formal institutions are formulated in terms of orthodox modes of correctness, then the informal institutions are generated from social members’ inherent needs to be compliant with tacit rationality. The formal rules tell cadres what they should do as elements of state authority but do not inform cadres how to act as a friend as well as be participants in economic activities, not to mention how they should balance the tension between different roles when they have to – which constitutes most of the cases in real life. This is why an informal or unorthodox institution keeps getting reinforced.

In fact, in Chinese folklore, there is a term for all domains that are not covered by orthodox forms of control, that is “*Jianghu*.” Accordingly, all practical but unorthodox tricks are called “*Jianghu* rules” or “*Jianghu* wisdom.” With a literal meaning of rivers and lakes, the term *Jianghu* in Chinese has rich metaphorical connotations. As just mentioned, it represents the collective of everything in a hidden world which is not authenticated by orthodox forms of

authority. For a long time, scholars have been confused about what *Jianghu* is exactly, as it appears to be more like a spirit than a concrete entity. Moreover, its impact on social life is ubiquitous. As the saying goes, wherever there are people, there is *Jianghu*. A Chinese scholar wrote about *Jianghu*, interpreting it as one kind of structure that does not exist exclusively in China but still has typical characteristics within the historical and social context of China. It is alive and adjusts its form to different social fields. In officialdom it is called “non-organisational activities,” in academia it is called “disciple” (*shimen*), and in folklore, it is constituted of all kinds of underground factions. When I did fieldwork in Chongqing, I noticed that people often name their stores or restaurants using “*Jianghu*.” Shop boards like “*Jianghu* Hotel,” “*Jianghu* Food,” “*Jianghu* Hotpot,” “*Jianghu* Bar,” “*Jianghu* fish” were everywhere. So I asked people what they thought *Jianghu* was. I got answers like *Jianghu* was “the counterpart of orthodoxy,” “not so noble but practical,” or “it is a mix of everything.” Typical among all of them was the explanation from a famous local cook, who said, “I think *Jianghu* food is a common homemade-like dish. The spirit of *Jianghu* was, ‘no matter how I did it, as long as the outcome makes everyone satisfied and comfortable.’” His answer also echoes the words of an entrepreneur I had interviewed in a central Liaoning city. He told me that “it doesn’t matter at all whether you are well-educated or capable enough in the professional sense. The key to success is your compatibility of lubricating interpersonal relationships. I can survive not because I am good at doing business but because I have my way of dealing with people. You do not need to know how exactly I did it; I just have my way.”

By proposing a thesis about tacit rationality, I suggest that the core of *Jianghu* wisdom – which is conceptualised in this study as informal patterns of operating – is its compliance with rationality-oriented reasoning. It seems to have no firm modules because at its kernel is adaptation to the environment. As mentioned in the preface, a retired county party secretary, Li Kejun, wrote in his book that the fundamental principle for local cadres’ daily practice is “there being no principle.” To operate without a work brief entails *Jianghu* wisdom, namely the strong instinct of following tacit rationality. In daily practice, it is more important to have things done in a widely accepted way than to stick in dogmatic compliance with what is orthodox. Going back to the core argument of this study, underlying the routinisation of corruption – especially in the form of transactions – lies the conflict between two standards of “best:” one is formally prescribed, and another is defined by a tacit reasoning. While the later

ultimately determines the validity of the former and dominates people's decision-making as well as the effectiveness of an institution. To put it another way, in daily practice, the legitimacy of an action is defined neither by its purpose nor by any firm, single legal or moral criteria but by its symbolic meaning, or we could say, its capacity to reflect relevant social relations and convey commonly-accepted values. There is no absolute right or wrong, only appropriate or inappropriate behaviour given certain contexts.

We are all performers and the key to maintaining our performance – namely cooperative interaction – and therefore, the functioning of society is to produce the expression in which all idealised values are respected and realised. This thought might provide an alternative perspective for viewing the necessity of the transaction form of corruption. People achieve certain sources through social exchanges, while at the same time, they also express and conform with each other their mutual relations and obligations through such practices by selecting the counterpart, object, and means of exchange. Transactional corruption is in essence also one form of exchange behaviour. Correspondingly, instead of assuming that corruption is the result of people's optimal solution-seeking given certain external conditions, I contend that corruption could also be invoked as an expressive tool based on people's interpretation of the concrete situation and their consideration of how to sustain the cooperative interaction. The crux of comprehending the routinisation of corruption lies not in how it is possible but in examining the symbolic social meaning conveyed through corruption within a concrete context, namely in what sense corruption makes up an alternative tool of an expressive apparatus that sustains the functioning of cooperative interaction among those in a society.

Tacit Rationality and Transactional Corruption

As the power in and behind the reinforcement of informal institutions have been illuminated, an alternative view of the puzzle concerning why people consciously choose to be corrupt also comes into play. For a long time, the focal concern of scholars who delve into the root of corruption has been the institutional conditions facilitating such illicit self-seeking practices. Emerging from a normative perspective, most studies in the field concentrate exclusively on seeking a solution and meanwhile overlook another crucial attribute of corruption, especially the transaction form of corruption, that is, part of its nature as simply one form of social exchange or interaction.

Consequently, dominated by a tacit assumption with a particular emphasis on the deviant, immoral, and illegal side of corruption, current research has paid too much attention to its practical reference while largely ignored its symbolic meaning, a situation that finally leads to the lack of capacity of current theoretical approaches to explain the routinisation or normalisation of transactional corruption in many places. To fill in the gap, this study scrutinises the mechanism underpinning transactional corruption by conceptualising it as one form of cooperative behaviour rather than an individualistic action driven by illicit self-serving. I propose conceiving of corruption as a symbolic social exchange that has rich implications rather than as an isolated, illicit practice purely aimed at maximising personal profit or utility. In this sense, corrupt transactional exchanges – typical of bribery and nepotism – is supposed to be more like a means of gaining certain social relations rather than the goal. Accordingly, since transactional corruption is one form of social exchange which constitutes the core ingredient of the informal institution prevalent in a society, we could say that the mechanism endorsing all kinds of ritualised exchange practices is also the force that drives and rationalises transactional corruption. The only thing distinguishing corrupt transactions from other exchange practices is that the object of the former involves entrusted power. But essentially, as with any other form of exchange, the pragmatical legitimacy of corruption rests on its capacity to convey idealised values claimed through participants' roles within a concrete context instead of its correctness in terms of any specific legal or moral criterion.

Referring to the thesis of tacit rationality and the view of CDA, corruption is not simply a deviant practice but rather an eclectic choice to totalise the power struggle between CPC cadres as the ruling group and people from other walks of life as the ruled groups. Such a struggle specifically manifests itself as the tension among multiple subject positions of the individual cadre. To sustain the cooperative interaction as well as the solidarity of society, people need to invoke a complex of routinised patterns to consolidate the foundation for reciprocal cooperation, namely to convey an impression that all idealised values involved in the situation are respected and realised. And this complex of operative patterns does not exclude corruption, and even shares the same structure with it. Therefore, corruption becoming “unavoidable” implies a situation where there are certain meanings or values best expressed through such a practice. To put it another way, rather than assuming that people intentionally choose to take part in corrupt exchanges at the very beginning of their decision-

making process, it would be more accurate to say that for some of the time, the “best” way of expressing certain meanings, to make the interaction proceed smoothly and achieve the pragmatic goals happens to be corruption in specific contextual situations.

If we take this view, then another way of conceiving the root of corruption suggests itself. I argue that the crux of disentangling the empirical puzzle about the “unavoidability” of corruption lies in not what interests have been traded nor in how such practices are realised but in which meanings or values are conveyed through certain behaviours defined by the law as corrupt and why people regard corruption as the most appropriate tool to express these values. Correspondingly, to explain the normalisation and rationalisation of corruption, we should focus our analysis on the meaning signified by a corrupt transaction within concrete contexts. We thus have to examine how people select their counterpart in an exchange or how they act discriminately in front of different counterparts, as well as how they choose the object and means of the transaction.

This frame of thinking might also explain the delicate relationship between corruption and the functioning of the social system, which is indicated by people’s ambivalent attitude towards corruption. What is condemned by people is corruption in its abstract sense as the representation of injustice, while in daily practice the boundary between justice and injustice remains contested, obscure and context-related. Sometimes, people might not intentionally take part in corrupt exchanges but comply with its tacit rationality. To take an example, I once met a cadre who had experienced electoral bribery. He narrated to me his mental process during that incident:

He [the briber] went to my office, asking me to do him a favour [voting for the briber in the forthcoming election] as an old friend in a very sincere tone. He told me that he knew I would support him; he trusted me. But before he left, he still gave me a sealed envelope. Of course, we all understood what was in it. I felt quite embarrassed at that moment. I knew him for a long time, and we had a very good relationship. He might not be the best candidate for that position, but I would neither say that he was not competent for his work, and that was the last chance for him to step to a higher position before he got retired. Besides, as a friend, he also helped me out of difficulties before. No matter how I did not want to break our friendship. But if I took the money, then the nature of the matter would be changed. It was not right to make money either for offering a vote as a cadre or for supporting your friend. Finally, I refused to keep that envelope and told him that I would vote for him. I did. Maybe I had a little bit selfish motivation in dealing with this event, but I think what I did was the most appropriate thing for that moment. At least I did not step over the line.

Given his words, the first question would be, did he really step over the line, and how shall we understand the connotation of this line in his narrative? As he implied, as long as he did not keep the envelope filled in with money, he should not be condemned for taking part in a

corrupt practice. But by voting for a person who was not the best choice – as he also admitted – out of the consideration of maintaining his personal ties, this cadre still stepped over the line, for what he did, essentially, was trading the entrusted power and obligation of electing most suitable official for the country and the Party for friendship. He did not accept a concrete reward, but neither did he execute his power impartially. To some extent, what he did was risk the future of the organisation and the country on an irresponsible vote. Besides, as he said, the briber – his friend, has also helped him in some way before, and this could also be understood as an exchange that very likely involves all kinds of benefits, including money. So what is the substantial difference between taking money immediately when being asked for a favour and taking money beforehand or in the future? In this sense, this cadre abused his power for private consideration, which means that he did participate in corruption. The only thing that made him seem to be “innocent” was that he did not manage the deal by taking the money. However, did he believe that he was innocent? Probably not, for he also mentioned that he was aware of his “selfish motivation.” Then a more important question comes up, why would he vote for his friend even though he was fully aware of the inappropriateness of his action? Why didn't he turn his friend down?

To understand the logic behind this cadre's decision-making, we need to understand it within a frame of the obligation of taking, giving and returning instead of from a normative perspective. Intuitively, the cadre was involved in a corrupt transaction, but if we look at it another way, what he did was not just about corruption in terms of a legal perspective and did not just concern illicit intentions from the beginning. By passively joining the corrupt transaction and controlling the object of exchange to a moderate degree, he was trying to sustain his credentials of staying in the cooperative network. Firstly, by building up a good relationship through constant personal exchange that might not involve corrupt transaction, this cadre has established a mutual commitment with the briber (his friend), so when the briber came to him for help, whether he offered his support or not it was no longer about whether what his friend asked him to do was legal or not but about whether he could keep his reputation. If he refused to help, then his friend would take it in a way that he did not keep the tacit promise between friends, and he might lose access to the reciprocal interaction with his friend in the future. Moreover, if his friend disseminated any negative judgment about him in their circle, he would be viewed by the other people as someone who was not trustworthy. This is why he believed that he was obliged to help his friend, as both the proof of the

adherence to the commitment to a friend and the compliance with the equivalent exchange principle. However, as he was also aware of his public role, he could not simply do whatever his friend expected him to do. This means he had to find a way to maintain his reputation among the small circle and at the same time prevent himself from being condemned for violating party discipline and state law.

Then we come to the second level of this exchange, which specifically manifests itself in his selection of the object of exchange. He refused to take money for voting and by doing this conveyed the idea that it was not a trade, but simply a form of help, a normal exchange based on affection between two friends, and in this sense, he signified his loyalty to the party and rationalised his action. As he said, if he took the money, then the “nature” of the whole thing would be different. Nevertheless, the nature of the event per se did not change, regarding both the party discipline and state law, the cadre has committed corruption, but it was the meaning conveyed through his action rather than the illicit intention that was the real force that pushed him to join in such a transaction.

By highlighting the fact that ritualised and symbolic social exchange practices share the same operative logic and structure as transactional forms of corruption, I aim to demonstrate the mechanism which endorses corruption exchange by examining the effectiveness of corruption-inclusive informal institutions. By seeing corruption as one form of exchange that is not excluded by the informal operation patterns prevailing among the realm of officialdom, I contend that the force that endorses the latter also at the same time endorses the rationalisation and reinforcement of the former. In other words, the routinisation of corruption is rooted in the local cadres’ daily operational logic which is situated in their unique social status. Accordingly, the crux of disentangling the puzzle of “unavoidable” corruption ultimately lies in illuminating the mechanism that dominates the cadres’ decision-making, which is specifically manifest in how they totalise different expectations claimed by multiple roles endowed by their unique social status.

Conclusion

Tacit rationality: toward the hidden force dominating human action and an alternative theoretical view of perceiving corruption

In daily social interaction, the legitimacy of a social action rests on its accordance with the tacit rationalising-oriented rationality – its expressive compacity of conveying commonly-accepted idealised values entailed by the involved social relations – rather than its substantial objective or specific legal/moral criterion.¹²⁸ This is the core theoretical argument of the whole dissertation. Based on this idea and the first-hand empirical data collected through interviews and participant observation during my eight months' field study in China, I propose that the routinisation of corruption cannot be conceived of from a normative view due to a series of methodological and theoretical restrictions engendered by it. Instead, behind the puzzle of “unavoidable” corruption lies not merely the empirical reflection on the quality of institutional design and implementation but rather the theoretical inquiry about what endows the legitimacy of a social action as well as the effectiveness of an institution.

To explain the question why people consciously choose to participate in corruption while morally condemning it and being fairly well aware of its risks, we need to step back from stereotypical judgments, and not focus exclusively on the deviant attribute of transactional corruption – typical of bribery and nepotism – but on its most original nature. This is to say, we ought to conceive of corruption as a symbolic social action, namely an alternative way of engaging in cooperative interaction which follows the same logic as normal interpersonal favours or gift exchanges. In this sense, we can infer that the domination of a series of informal patterns of behaviour as well as the normalisation of acts of formally-prescribed official corruption can be accounted for by their accordance with tacit rationality toward cooperation and an ordered state of society, which means that the mechanism underpinning the constant reinforcement of certain informal institutions founded on personal ties also endorses corruption. Consequently, corruption appearing to be “unavoidable” means that the

¹²⁸ For example, if an urban management officer imposes a severe penalty on a poor street peddler, even though this action is totally in compliance with administrative law, this officer might still not be able to avoid condemnation from the public. Because by dogmatically enforcing the law, such action implicates not so much adherence to the impartiality principle as a lack of sympathy. This officer might do the right thing in terms of one value criterion claimed by his public duty, but also fails in the sense of ignoring another concerning his social role as a citizen the same as everyone else who is supposed to behave sympathetically. In essence, he is criticised for violating not visible law but an invisible law which entails totalising and balancing.

attainment of all goals – be they licit or illicit – must be based on the same complex of informal procedures that do not exclude corruption. Under certain situational contexts, a behaviour that is defined by formal-coded law as corruption might be the most reasonable or the only way of expressing relevant idealised values. Corruption is thus endorsed by its symbolic meaning rather than as a pure self-interest seeking impulse rooted in human nature. As Ke Zhujun and Yue Lei (2014) indicated, “the boundary between normal personal exchange and corruption exists only in the law, but not in the daily social practice.”

Corruption studies have long been confined to a normative frame. Always keeping certain fixed ideal visions of how society should function in mind, practitioners tend to take corruption as something deviant and naturally give exclusive attention to finding out what environmental conditions cause such deviance – the violation of formally-coded rules – as well as how to correct it. However, we rarely doubt whether our vision about the ideal condition of social functioning per se is questionable. Immersing ourselves in looking for a solution, we have overlooked a more fundamental question: what is the source of legitimacy of a social action? Furthermore, what determines the effectiveness of an institution? Is it some specific guiding ideology or logical perfection that guarantees it functions well, or some other hidden principle? The neglecting of these inquiries leads to a situation that sees current theories fall short in explaining how some social actions – typical of corruption – orthodoxically defined as abnormal become normal. We have identified the flaws of the institutional design, yet we cannot answer why formal institutions are always bypassed or just ignored in spite of its quality. In other words, we concentrate too much on necessary conditions for the realisation of corrupt practices but pay little attention to the sufficient conditions that entail corruption. However, it is the latter instead of the former that constitutes the Gordian knot of seeking the causal explanation, as indicated by Holmes (2015, 86), when stating that “correlations do not prove causality.” Accordingly, I argue that a persuasive explanatory frame for the normalisation of corruption should be able to address two issues.

The first issue concerns distinguishing correlation and causality. A large amount of research has explained corruption by examining its correlation with the size of government, religion, historical background, economic growth, lifestyle, so on and so forth. They are all proven to be related to the scale or level of corruption, but rather as influential than as causal factors. Mixing up the correlated and causal factors gives rise to confusions such as chicken-egg explanations. Corrupt practices appearing to be “necessary” indicates a situation whereby

people's action is dominated by a set of heterodox patterns rather than the formally prescribed ones. Accordingly, the searching for a causal explanation entails more effort into exploring why formal institutions do not function effectively compared with the informal ones rather than how we can perfect the laws or regulations. I thus hypothesise that it is subjective rather than objective rationality that fundamentally accounts for the normalisation of corruption. Besides, external constraints will never be able to cover all possibilities; there is no such thing as a perfect institution. In the end, if rigid law guaranteed by harsh punishment is the only way of keeping people from crossing the line, and their existence manifests an obstacle that is supposed to be bypassed or even misinterpreted, rather than the auxiliary apparatus for maintaining order for social members, then the theoretical inquiry comes to the source of legitimacy of an institution instead of its perfection for its own sake.

Secondly, the theoretical frame is expected to address the mechanism behind social subjects' decision-making in terms of how individual agency can be examined together with structural forces and therefore to shed light on how we can link our knowledge about corruption to the understanding of more general principles about the functioning of human society. Inspired by Mannheim, Goffman, and Polanyi's ideas, I hypothesise the existence of an invisible force that dominates human reasoning processes and endows legitimacy to social actions as well as the effectiveness of institutions. I further assume that this force is the one that accounts for the building of consensus and correspondingly the formation of society. Essentially, all discussions about corruption centre around the topic of selfishness, while selfishness embedded within the collective good, and the collective could be an organisation such as a political party, a country, or simply a broad sense of society, the members of which share common cultural backgrounds.

Existing approaches towards corruption place emphasis either on "external factors," namely institutional settings, or "internal factors," which are culturally or traditionally dominant values. Nevertheless, admitting the significance of existing explanations and given the complexity of human nature, I propose a more dynamic, meso-approach, contending that we need a more holistic assumption about human subjectivity, but not by simply summing all the influential factors up; instead, we should conceive of the multifaceted dimensions of human subjectivity as an organic whole. As Heywood stated, "[p]eople are corrupt for numerous reasons, and even where there is an identifiable primary motivation, this differs from one person or group to the next. It would therefore be naive to assume there is one underlying

general explanation, such as greed or opportunity. [...] we need to identify the various factors that, in combination, explain corruption [...] in the real world, they interact, overlap, and combine with each other in complex ways” (Heywood 2014, 277). In short, a powerful explanatory frame should neither under-socialise (or atomise) nor over-socialise individual actors, for both views are paradoxically similar in their neglect of ongoing structures of social relations (Granovetter 1985). Rather, to disentangle the puzzle of “unavoidable” corruption, we need a conceptual apparatus that synthesises the two ends of the theoretical spectrum.

To address the above considerations, I propose a thesis of tacit rationality to conceptualise the hidden force underpinning the construction of society, which also constitutes the source of the legitimacy of a social action and the effectiveness of an institution. Founded on Mannheim’s relational view of how people think, Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective toward human action, as well as Polanyi’s idea about tacit knowing, I contend that human action is ultimately oriented towards cooperation and thereby an orderly state of society rather than the fulfillment of either utilitarian or value-driven pursuits. Correspondingly, social subjects’ action is dominated by a tacit principle of seeking the most justifiable instead of the optimal solution. The legitimacy of action and the effectiveness of an institution rest on their compliance with this tacit justification-oriented reasoning. I thus argue that the emergence, consolidation and reinforcement of an institution can be comprehended given its capacity to serve the maintenance of society’s inherent demand for order, namely the establishment of cooperative commitment among individual members. The way in which an institution fulfills this task is by conveying commonly-accepted values – the basis for mutual justification and cooperation – through a set of symbolic verbal and non-verbal actions. Accordingly, I identify the corruption-inclusive institution as an expressive mechanism that is repeatedly invoked by its performers (social subjects), the effectiveness of which lies in its capacity to express different idealised views rather than its logical perfection. Based on this theoretical perspective, I reconceptualise corruption – specifically in transactional forms – as one type of social exchange or interaction and propose that the source of its pragmatic “legitimacy” can be understood in terms of its expressive function, namely its compliance with tacit rationality.

Reconceptualising corruption: Transactional corruption as one form of ritualised exchange behaviour endorsed by its symbolic social meaning

Identifying the obstacle of defining corruption based on a general review of

predominant research paradigms: What are we talking about when we talk about corruption? This question has plagued academia ever since humanity became aware of corruption. Almost all research in the realm of corruption studies starts with a discussion about definition. There is even a lot of research that specially discusses the issue of how corruption should be defined.¹²⁹ However, a universally-recognised definition of corruption has never emerged. This is commonly attributed to two reasons. One is that value criterion, legal systems and cultural traditions are different from place to place and time to time; another concerns the variety of research angle, which is to say, in terms of diverse disciplinary interests and assumptions about social subjects' motivation, corruption is conceptualised and interpreted differently. As indicated by the existing literature, corruption has been defined and explained from but not limited to the views of law, morality, culture, and public opinion.¹³⁰

Regarding the lack of consensus about the definition, there are two main lines of thought, which also constitute the most predominant paradigms of corruption study – positivism and interpretivism. The former views an authoritative definition of corruption as not being so necessary and instead emphasises the rigorousness of methodology. Most studies in this line emanate from economic theories and concentrate on a specific clear-cut-defined type of corrupt practice. Mostly taking micro and deductive approaches, they seek to measure and examine the correlations among variables as accurately as possible. Specifically, the positivist

¹²⁹ Representative works include Heidenheimer, Johnston, and Levine (1989), Farrales (2005), Varraich (2014), Kurer (2015), Klitgaard (2017), Rothstein and Varraich (2017), and Rose (2018), etc. Rothstein (2014) and Teorell (2008) has also discussed the “opposite” of corruption and defined it as “high quality of government” or “impartiality in the exercise of public power,” namely “[w]hen implementing laws and policies, government officials shall not take anything about the case/citizen into consideration that is not beforehand stipulated in the law or policy.”

¹³⁰ Heidenheimer (1989) has contributed groundbreaking work by distinguishing three approaches of defining and explaining corruption. “Public office centered approach”: “[Corruption is] behavior which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (close family, personal, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence” (Nye 1967, 419). According to Nye, the second part of this definition is taken from Edward C. Banfield, *Political Influence* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1961), p. 315; “Market centered approach”: “A corrupt civil servant regards his (public) office as a [separate] business, the income of which he will [...] seek to maximize. The office then becomes a ‘maximizing unit’. The size of his income depends [...] upon the market situation and his talents for finding the point maximal gain on the public’s [or clients’] demand curve” (van Klaveren in Heidenheimer, Johnston, and Levine (1989); and “Public interest centered approach “The pattern of corruption can be said to exist whenever a powerholder who is charged with doing certain things, i.e. who is responsible functionary or officeholder, is by monetary or other rewards not legally provided for, induced to take actions which favor whoever provides the rewards and thereby does damage to the public and its interests” (Friedrich 1966, 74).

economic paradigm looks exclusively at the influence of the institutional environment that creates a profitable space for corrupt practices. It presumes that given certain institutional structures defining the expected costs¹³¹ and rewards of engaging in corrupt practices, as long as the later outweigh the former, everyone tends to participate in corrupt practices, and this principle equally applies to not only public officials but also bribe-givers if involved.

However, the weakness of this paradigm manifests as that, “by focusing mainly on why and when corruption is profitable” based on individualistic cost-benefit model, “the answers often have to be trivial” and “the larger and more significant socio-political environment in which corruption occurs” is not taken as the focus of analysis (Lü 2000).

The interpretivism paradigm pays more attention to the endemic meaning of corruption within certain social contexts and usually advocates qualitative-inductive approaches. Although somewhat different from the positivist paradigm in data collecting and interpreting, this approach also generally develops within an economic rational-choice frame. The focus of its analysis can be labeled as “moral cost” (Vannucci 2017, 260). In other words, it looks at the trade-off between substantial and psychological utility, assuming “[i]ndividuals suffer higher costs when, in both their own and their peers’ perspectives, corrupt behaviour involves a violation of values – like ‘public service’ – which are deeply internalized and socially shared” (Lambsdorff et al. 2005, 152).¹³² In this sense, the social-cultural approach provides a “nuance and subtlety” (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016, xvii) to the principal-agent model, contending that corruption can be well contained when value structures change. The social-cultural paradigm explicitly indicates the significant influence of cultural or mental factors, but it falls short of asking the more fundamental questions of how and why certain culturally dominated values have survived changes in society” by “assigning too much unwarranted explanatory power to the value system as an independent variable” (Lü 2000, 17–20). Moreover, “when one considers endemic values as an underlying cause for problems, the account might convey cultural essentialism” (Hizi 2014).

Ultimately, a forceful explanation of corruption has to be and can only be built on a thorough insight into its nature, which is to say, we cannot avoid the definition issue before achieving

¹³¹ As Vannucci (2017, 255) summarised, expected risks and costs of corruption specially refers to “risk of being reported and punished” and the “severity of the potential penalties.”

¹³² “Variations in moral cost can therefore explain the different individual responses to similar opportunities for corruption: ‘people in a given society face the same institutions but may have different values’” (Elster 1989).

any further understanding of the mechanism of corruption. The abovementioned two lines of thinking either tries to go around the frontline of the debate or gets fettered by a relativist view of corruption, yet neither of them provides a conceptualisation of corruption that directly addresses the complexity of human motivation and the mutual dynamic of social structure and agency. Moreover, both of them knowingly or unknowingly overlook the distinction between factual and perceived corruption, which creates even more confusion. Therefore, considering the disadvantages of existing explanations and the fact that corruption refers not only to concrete practices violating laws and moralities but also to a notion, what is still needed is a conceptualisation capable of addressing two issues. On the one hand, it should be able to capture the complexity of human motivational structures, as well as the interrelationship between individual action and the wider structural environment. On the other hand, it is supposed to implicate not only what values and institutions are involved with corruption, but also why and how they contribute to the construction of the concept of corruption as well as how they are invoked, shaped and changed by the social climate.

The abstract and concrete concept of corruption: To make the conceptual frame more operative and to further identify the theoretical puzzle underneath systemic corruption, I suggest that we should first distinguish abstract and concrete concepts of corruption. Giving corruption a universally-accepted definition seems to be an impossible task, but it is also undoubted that when we talk about corruption in the UK and Africa, or in ancient and contemporary China, we are definitely not referring to totally different things. There are still consensuses underneath particularities that make all studies interrelated. Despite the everlasting dispute about how to define corruption, all attempts to define it encompass two levels of connotation. First, “underneath [...] concepts of corruption lurk [...] the ‘impartiality principle’” (Kurer 2005, 222) so that in an abstract sense, the term “corruption” represents the violation of distributive justice, which in particular involves public power, as Transparency International defines it: “abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” Yet when it comes to concrete contexts, the standard of justice is often blurred and contentious.¹³³ The abstract concept of corruption indicates the violation of social distributive order while people have different perspectives on the concrete criterion of impartiality. But no matter how the

¹³³ For work revealing this contradiction see Smith (2014), and several other of his studies on corruption in Nigeria.

connotation of impartiality is interpreted, what remains unquestionable is the inherent demand of impartiality in society. In real practice, the imputation about corruption involves a process of trade-off among different values and norms that can only be traced to concrete social-historical contexts. Meanwhile, the concept of corruption in a concrete sense is always relative and not determined by a single norm or even norms themselves. Instead, corruption in a practical sense is defined by a subject's general view about social norms, namely how they discern their positions and tasks, and the establishment of such a view is intrinsically related to and mutually influenced by subjects' social positions.

Therefore, I argue that, though the concept of corruption is related to context and perspective, the essential obstacle to an authoritative definition of corruption is still theoretical, not operational, and the fundamental difficulty of defining and judging corruption lies in the complexity of human motivational structures. All social subjects simultaneously act within many relationships defined by different goals and institutions. Accordingly, "societies obviously do not use a single, consistent method to make allocative decision," but often use "mixed systems." "Both market and non-market mechanisms clearly have important allocative roles to play," but they "do not easily fit under one or another simple rubric" (Rose-Ackerman 1978, 1); it is "trade-offs between competing goals" that determine human action. In real practice, imputation about corruption does not necessarily come down to "whether or not an actual law has been broken," but to how people invoke and balance between different norms to interpret what is legitimate action and what is not. Ultimately, the definition and judgment about corruption depend on the "the conceptual and ideological framework in which [...] interests are described" (Granovetter 2004, 8).¹³⁴

Transactional corruption as symbolic action in accordance with society's demand for cooperative order: With the abstract and concrete concepts of corruption in mind, I

¹³⁴ Granovetter's example between employers and employees has well illustrated how an action could be defined differently as corrupt or not corrupt based on different ways of interpretation: "engineers who spent too much company money on dinner were excused by the CEO because they had gotten so many good sales leads. [...] when employees remove goods or use services of their employers without authorization and in clear violation of company policy. These would seem straightforward cases of corrupt behaviour, but not if a local consensus assumes that employees deserved what they got [...]" (Granovetter 2004, 4). He denominates the rationalization of theoretic corruption "principle of neutralization," and further defined it as "an account that acknowledges the causal connection between a payment and a service, [...] implies that given the particular circumstances, no moral violation has occurred" (Granovetter 2004, 3). Neutralization of corruption is a very intriguing formulation, for it implies the existence of a higher socially constructed principle that goes beyond the fabric of norms on which the condemnation of corruption is built.

conceptualise the fundamental criterion of impartiality or justice as a balanced state, not a concrete criterion. It is a state when various idealised views are totalised, namely situated within one frame, and such a state guarantees the smooth-running of cooperative interaction. I further maintain that human practice is often unconsciously and tacitly directed by a rationality oriented toward achieving such a state, with rationalisation rather than optimisation as the core task. Accordingly, all purposeful actions attain justification by representing instead of realising idealised views and values, for rationalisation is essentially a process of eliminating the uncertainty. Based on this thought, I propose conceiving of transactional corruption as one form of social exchange included among a complex of informal behaving patterns, and that arguing whether people participate in or reject corrupt exchanges is determined by whether it is dominated by the tacit order-oriented rationality instead of the substantial goal or specific value orientation. As with all other forms of social action, corruption – though defined by formal law as deviant practices – is endorsed by its symbolic meaning.

Founded on the aforementioned conceptualisation of transactional corruption, this study offers both theoretical and empirical contributions. Mainstream theories see corruption as an initiative behaviour rooted in self-seeking, and based upon such a premise examine either the structural factors that facilitate corruption or the positive and negative impacts of corrupt practices on all aspects of social life. While concentrating exclusively on a specific scenario of corruption – namely when corruption becomes an expected action that goes beyond individual choice – this research asserts that corruption could also be a result of negotiation or compromise. As one form of social interaction, corruption constitutes an inextricable part of a complex of informal institutions endorsed by society's inherent demand for order and cooperation. Focusing my analysis on China, I examine why and how people are forced into corrupt exchange networks by rationalising-oriented reasoning, namely through tacit rationality. The objective of this research consists not so much as in the cause of corruption as in the cause of the routinisation of corruption. And through probing into the mechanism behind the normalisation of corrupt exchanges, I attempt to construct a theoretical frame given the general social principle of how people make decisions as well as the source of an institution's effectiveness. In general, all kinds of corrupt practices to some extent root in selfishness as part of human nature, and this study does not intend to challenge this fundamental consensus. But neither shall I comprehend the puzzle of “unavoidable”

corruption from this view. I suggest that the pursuit of maximising self-interest might explain the generality of corruption, or to be accurate, the superficial level of the cause of corruption, but not the scenario when corruption appears to be pervasive and rationalised. When corruption becomes a collective rather than individual choice, the question then switches from what leads to the uncontrolled self-seeking to why self-seeking inevitably bounds to corruption. And the later entails a multi-layered and hierarchical view towards human motivation.

Tacit rationality, reinforcement of informal institutions, and official corruption in China

Concentrating on the interactive attribute of transactional corruption, this study explains the routinisation of official corruption in China by illuminating the source of the effectiveness of corruption-inclusive informal institutions of which interpersonal exchange – be it licit or illicit – is a core ingredient. I propose that a complex of informal operative patterns that do not exclude corruption are repeatedly adopted by people and are therefore constantly reinforced because they serve the establishment of reciprocal cooperation and social order. Aside from the established legal and moral judgments, corruption can also be conceived as an alternative equipment of the whole expressive apparatus of this informal exchange institution. As the demand for sustaining the functioning of mutual cooperative commitment constitutes the fundamental motivation of social interaction, whether a substantial goal can be reached is not determined by if it is deemed legitimate in terms of specific legal or moral criterion, but by whether it is handled by the social subject justifiably. In this sense, the boundary between normal exchange and corrupt exchange is inherently blurred. Thus, corruption, as well as the other types of exchange that do not necessarily involve entrusted power, are all tools and credentials for maintaining cooperative interaction. I hypothesise that the core mechanism endorsing the effectiveness of a complex of corruption-inclusive institutions is that they create a space for individuals to totalise their multiple subjective roles according to situational context, which is to say that they have more compatibility to convey different commonly-accepted idealised values. And by successfully creating the impression that those idealised values are well-considered, the informal institutions, including corrupt exchanges get reinforced and rationalised. To some extent, participating in ritualised exchange is a way of maintaining the cooperative order within a group. It is by following the right procedures to

participate in reciprocal interaction that individuals signify their awareness of the obligations and positions within the group so as to promote substantial goals.

Therefore, to understand in what sense corruption appears to be unavoidable, I look at in what sense it is in accordance with tacit rationality, as the means of how we explain the expressive capacity, namely the source of legitimacy of any other symbolic action. This entails a close examination of the social meanings conveyed through corrupt exchanges in concrete situational contexts. I thus look at how CPC cadres totalise different idealised values claimed by their multiple subject roles by invoking informal institutions which do not exclude corruption. Every social subject is a performer, and for most of the time, the performer has to play more than one single role simultaneously in front of the same audience. Each role has an idealised character consisting of a series of commonly accepted values that need to be conveyed through the performance. To maintain the smooth operation of the show, the performer is concerned more about the issue of how to engineer the impression that all values are realised rather than dwelling on the moral issue of how to realise them. In this sense, institutions, which are essentially patterns of verbal and nonverbal signifying acts, can be seen as expressive equipment repeatedly adopted by the performer. Their effectiveness rests on the capacity to convey commonly accepted values as rational voids helping to eliminate uncertainty and to create the ground for cooperation among the social members. The national standing of the PRC endows a unique status on CPC cadres. They are elements of the ruling political party, members of families and groups, as well as participants of economic activities on behalf of both the government and themselves. These roles claim different idealised values: loyalty to the party, which also manifests the sense of belonging to the organisation, the respect for personal affection and commitment, as well as the principle of equivalent exchange. However, there is always tension among different roles, which entail the establishment of a totalising apparatus to situate different idealised values and expectations into one frame. This apparatus embodies an informal institutional complex with the task of guaranteeing the smooth-running of reciprocal interaction, which is to say, the cooperative order among the social members. The elementary structure of this institution is ritualised exchange. By taking part in constant exchange practices, people establish their credentials of entering into the network of cooperation, prove the fulfilment of their obligation, and reconsolidate the power relations, hierarchy, and mutual affection among members of a group. The compliance with such informal institutions does not necessarily entail corruption

all the time but makes the participants potential dots on this network. It is in this sense that corruption appears to be “unavoidable.” Because exchange is not only about the flow of various sorts of resources, but also about personal character, reputation and commitment. Accordingly, to avoid being involved in corrupt exchange also means to give up access to the opportunities of taking part in normal social exchange. In reverse, to get access to the resource, people have to join the “game” and at the same time become the potential participants of corruption, for licit and illicit exchange practices inherently share the same operating logic.

Scholars have long noticed that people participate in corrupt practices out of external or some “systemic pressure” (Karklins 2005) rather than for their pure hedonistic value, but the nature of this system is never explicitly conceptualized. Referring to the aforementioned theoretical frame, this study contributes to identifying this hidden force that triggers corruption. By viewing corruption as an alternative option of a toolbox – the informal institutional complex that serves the functioning of cooperative interaction among social members – instead of regarding it as an isolated, deviant practice, I propose that corruption is endorsed by its symbolic meaning, which specifically manifests itself in participants’ selection of counterpart, means, and object of exchange. Therefore, the crux of disentangling the routinisation of corruption lies in illuminating the source of effectiveness of the corruption-inclusive institutions. With the help of a series of techniques for applying CDA as the research methodology, I deconstruct the informal institution as an organic collection of a complex of verbal and non-verbal signifiers and delve into their social meaning. To conclude, I argue that when corruption appears to be unavoidable, what really matters is not how a corrupt transaction is realised or what kind of sources have been traded but what meaning people want to express through such activity and why it appears to be the most feasible way to convey the required meaning.

A final note about the mechanism of human reasoning

Studies and experiments on how people reason and come to decisions have been carried out by scientists from different realms including but not limited to psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, economics, sociology. While there are some basic inquiries concerning the meaning of being rational, to what extent people can be rational and even whether human

beings have the capacity to act rationally remain inadequately investigated. Notwithstanding the contest among a variety of theories, there seems to be a consensus that human reasoning is often biased, as described by some scholars, pre-scientific or pre-logical. It is the mix of a complex of logical, emotional and instinctive processes. A thorough understanding of this mechanism depends on advances in both cognitive science about how the human brain works, how people gain knowledge about themselves as well as the environment, and how individuals interact with each other as social animals. It is beyond the scope of this research to go into a comprehensive discussion that involves a deep inquiry into human neurological and psychological (subconscious) systems, so my theoretical framework approaches human reasoning exclusively from a sociological perspective. Nonetheless, I am convinced that there is no fundamental conflict between natural science and sociology approaches, for they are using different methods to examine different dimensions of the same question. I do not claim that my attempt in this study will lead to an omnipotent theory about the mechanism of human reasoning. Rather, taking corrupt practices as both the direct research object and lens, I propose a thesis of tacit rationality and try to situate tangible motivations such as cultural, emotional, and utilitarian goals within one explanatory frame. Advocating a hierarchical rather than parallel perspectives towards different dimensions of rationality, I identify an invisible and deeper level of rationality oriented towards rationalising instead of optimising. Specifically, I contend that the realisation of substantial or pragmatic goals must be based on compliance with tacit rationality through acting out value rationality. This is still a preliminary work. The further exploration entails more empirical findings as well as the deepening of our insight into the principles governing the establishment of social bonds and the functioning of interaction.

Appendix

The Fieldwork Timeline

Time Period	City	Target Groups		Research Methods
October-November, 2016	City group in Central Liaoning. Some additional fieldwork has been carried out in Hangzhou and Hefei during the trip to a Conference.	Middle-low level cadres	Ordinary people from all walks of life	Semi-structured interview; Expert interview; Participant Observation.
December-January, 2017	Chongqing			
February 2017	Retreat in Tokyo			
February- May 2017	Revisit some cities in Northeast China.			

The Focus of Observation and Interviews

Focus	Expected findings
General perceptions of corruption	How do different groups of people define corruption? What do they expect from the ongoing anti-corruption effort? How do they comment on corrupt cadres?
Anti-corruption policies of the Party	Interview cadres from policy research office about the major goals and guidelines, as well as the important documents about anti-corruption effort.
The effects of the anti-corruption effort within the officialdom	How does the ongoing anti-corruption effort influence the life of the cadres?
Perceptions about the root cause of corruption and difficulties of anti-corruption in China	<p>Why do so many cadres engage in corruption practice?</p> <p>What do the cadres think are the difficulties confronting the anti-corruption effort? Why?</p>
The daily life of middle-low level cadres: conditions and expectations of work and life	<p>How they balance the conflicts between different goals?</p> <p>Officialdom culture</p> <p>What are cadres concerned about most in both career and personal life?</p>
<i>Jianghu</i> Rules	<p>a. What is <i>jianghu</i>?</p> <p>b. What is the content of <i>jianghu</i> rules and what is its moral code? How does its moral code manifest in the discourse around it?</p> <p>c. How do <i>jianghu</i> rules operate? Observing the actual operation of “Disciple” (<i>shimen</i>), “Gentry” (<i>shishen</i>), Officialdom culture: How do <i>jianghu</i> rules integrate interest and identity of both individual and group? Whether there are solidarity and uprightness for a greater cause, or whether it is driven by the base, self-serving complicity?</p> <p>d. Under what circumstances does <i>jianghu</i> function? Why is <i>jianghu</i> able to permeate formal institutions?</p> <p>e. How is the moral landscape changing in contemporary China? (The doubts of individual and their pursuit of the correct thoughts.) How are the problems posed in the orthodox ways by the party and how does party discipline balance the requirement for innovation, creativity and courage one hand and the need for loyalty, closed ranks and shared determination on the other?</p> <p>f. What is the interrelationship between <i>jianghu</i> rules and corruption?</p> <p>g. How should we theoretically define an unorthodox structure like <i>jianghu</i>? Research on the underworld and traditional relationship of old China, patron-clients in Taiwan area, Mafia in Japan and Italy could be relevant.</p>

The List of Interviewees

No.	Code Name	Place	Gender	Age	Level and Position
1	CA	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Female	50-55	Level 8, Tax Bureau
2	LG	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Male	55-60	Level 7, Public Security Department
3	UL	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Male	55-60	Level 7, Development and Reform
4	FN	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Male	50-55	Level 5, Discipline Inspection
5	YU	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Male	55-60	Level 7, Labour and Social Insurance
6	GA	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Female	30-35	Level 7, Development and Reform
7	HB	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Male	40-45	Level 7, Development and Reform
8	JJ	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Male	40-45	Level 7, Discipline Inspection
9	NM1	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Male	40-45	Level 7, Development and Reform
10	SN	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Female	45-50	Level 7, Local Government
11	ZH	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Male	60-65	Level 6, Post Office
12	CU	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Male	40-45	Level 7, State-owned Bank
13	XM	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Male	55-60	Level 5, Policy Research Sector
14	XZ	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Male	40-45	Level 7, Development and Reform
15	HO	Sub-provincial level city 1 in Liaoning	Male	65-70	No Administrative level, Community services promotion commission
16	DL	Sub-provincial level city 1 in Liaoning	Female	30-35	No administrative level, University Staff
17	QE	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Male	60-65	No administrative level, Private
18	LQ	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Male	45-50	Level 5, Military Commissar
19	XX	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Female	40-45	Level 8, Public Security Department
20	BH	A small prefectural level city in	Male	30-35	No administrative level, Private
21	LB	A small prefectural level city in	Male	25-30	No administrative level, Private
22	SS	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Male	45-50	Level 6, People's Court
24	QG	Hangzhou	Male	35-40	No administrative level, Professor
25	XU	Hangzhou	Male	35-40	No administrative level, Private
26	XZ	Sub-provincial level city 1 in	Female	40-45	No administrative level, Overseas
27	LL	Sub-provincial level city 2 in	Female	35-40	No administrative level, Lawyer
28	UY	Chongqing	Male	55-60	Level 8, Insurance Regulatory
29	AY	Chongqing	Female	55-60	No administrative level, Bank
30	ZL	Chongqing	Female	55-60	Level 7, Surveying and Mapping
31	JS	Chongqing	Male	55-60	Level 7, Surveying and Mapping
32	CC	Chongqing	Male	55-60	Level 6, Surveying and Mapping
33	LJ	Chongqing	Female	35-40	Level 7, Education Bureau
34	JH1	Chongqing	Female	35-40	No administrative level, Private
35	JH2	Chongqing	Male	35-40	No administrative level, Private

Demographic Structure of the Target Group of the Fieldwork (Interviews and Ethnographic Observation) ¹³⁵

City group in central Liaoning Province	Cadres	Party and Government Sectors	Development and Reform Commission Policy Research Sector Tax Bureau Public Security Department Military Commissar Discipline Inspection Commission Post Office People's Court State-owned Bank Neighbourhood Committee and Resident Party Branch
		Public Institutions	Bank Public University
	Ordinary People		Taxi Drivers Private Entrepreneurs Overseas Chinese Lawyers Writers Professors High School Teachers Journalists College Students
	Social Organization		Community Services Promotion Commission
Hefei and Hangzhou	Cadres in Public Institution		Party School Public University
	Ordinary People		Employees in Service Industry Private Entrepreneurs Taxi drivers
Chongqing	Cadres in Party and Government Sectors		Insurance Regulatory Commission Surveying and Mapping Sector Education Bureau
	Ordinary People		College Students Bank Clerk Taxi Drivers Private Entrepreneurs

¹³⁵ Middle-low level cadres constitute the major body of my interview targets. In addition, to get a more general view about the debate on corruption, I also interviewed people from other walks of life. Referring to the “research report on social class in contemporary China” (*dangdai zhongguo shehui jieceng yanjiu baogao*) Lu (2002), I tried to formally interview or informally talk to one or two people from each social class in every fieldwork location.

Concrete Content in the Stage of Normative Critique of CDA

*Description (Vocabulary, Grammar, Textual structures)*¹³⁶

What experiential values do words have?

What relational values do words have?

What expressive values do words have?

What metaphors are used?

What experiential value do grammatical features have?

What types of process and participant predominate?

Is agency unclear?

Are processes what they seem?

Are nominalizations used?

Are sentences active or passive?

Are sentences positive or negative?

What relational values do grammatical features have?

What modes are used?

Are there important features of relational modality?

Are the pronouns we and you used, and if so, how?

What expressive values do grammatical features have?

How are (simple) sentences linked together?

What logical connectors are used?

Are complex sentences characterized by coordination or subordination?

What means are used for referring outside and inside the text?

What interactional conventions are used?

What is the turn-taking system?

Are there ways in which one participant controls the contributions of others?

What large-scale structures does the text have?

136 Fairclough, N. (2015): *Language and Power*. New York: Routledge: 131-156.

Interpretation¹³⁷

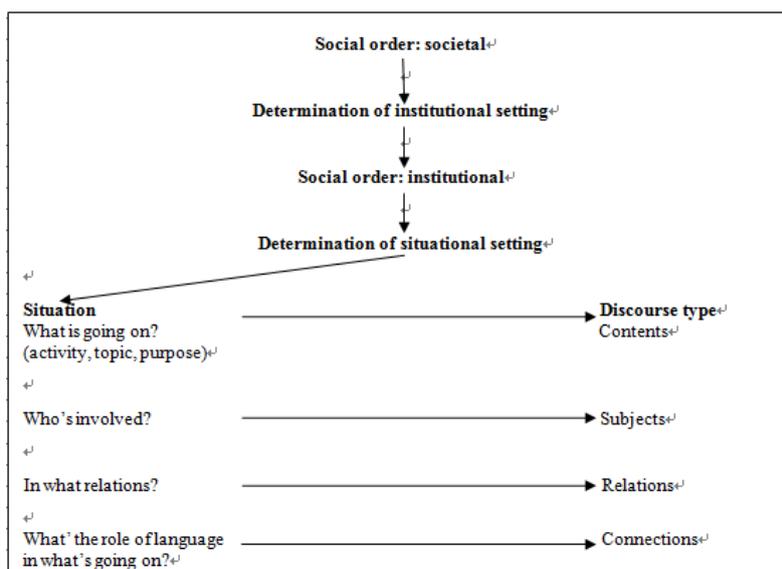
The surface of utterance: interpreters convert strings of sounds or marks into recognisable words, phrases and sentences.

Meaning of utterance: interpreters assign meanings to the constituent parts of a text.

Local coherence: establishing meaning connections between utterances, producing coherent interpretations of pairs and sequences of them.

Text structure and “point”: Interpretation of the text structure involves matching the text with one of a repertoire of schemata, or representations of characteristic patterns of organization associated with different types of discourse. The “point” of a text is a summary interpretation of the text as a whole which interpreters arrive at, and which is what tends to be stored in long-term memory so as to be available for recall.

Situational context and discourse type:



Intertextual context and presupposition: discourses and the texts which occur within them have histories, they belong to historical series, and the interpretation of intertextual context is a matter of deciding which series a text belongs to, and therefore what can be taken as a common ground for participants, or presupposed. Presuppositions are not properties of texts. They are an aspect of text producers' interpretations of intertextual context.

¹³⁷ Fairclough, N. (2015): Language and Power. New York: Routledge: 156-172.

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