

## Marketing the Party Official Inspections in China

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How can we explain the Chinese Communist Party's lasting legitimacy? Part of the answer may be found in the ritual official inspections of the grassroots. Even if limited and orchestrated, they tend to boost transparency, communication, efficiency.



*The Chinese President Xi Jinping chatting with peasants in China's Hunan Province during one of his inspection tours on Nov 3, 2013.*

The Chinese regime has surprised the world by its enduring reign over the Chinese people for more than six decades. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the only ruling party mandated by the Chinese Constitution, still enjoys more than 70, even up to 90, percent approval rate by the Chinese, according to both state and independent measures (Kennedy 2009). When the Arab Spring swept across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, many were expecting the same wave of democratization to arrive at China's shores. Yet, the Chinese regime proved effective and resilient in dispersing attempted public gatherings and, as a result, maintained social stability.

Why does the Chinese regime still stand? The most conspicuous yet overlooked element in Chinese politics is officials' visits to localities, called inspections. This unwritten form of political institution, since the founding of the CCP, has figured prominently in Chinese politics, grounding high-ranking officials to pragmatic governance and effectively connecting the state to the people. Chinese government inspections, with its high frequency and broad magnitude, find no counterparts in other non-democracies. The most similar form of political activity in Western democracies is political candidates, including incumbents in office, visiting constituencies for electoral interests. The difference, however, is that the Chinese do that regularly without having to adjust to election cycles, for there are no elections in China like those in the West.

### **Chinese Government Inspections**

In 2013, the Chinese president Xi Jinping spent his New Year's Eve at a village in Dingxi, Gansu Province called Yuan Gudui (远古堆村), a village rated as one of the most impoverished across China. The president's action, as observers claim, signaled to the entire nation his uncompromising resolve to combat poverty. Similarly, in a recent inspection to a remote village in Anhui Province, the President was seen in the state media holding the callous hands of the toiling peasants, inquiring into their struggles against life challenges. The emotionally charged peasant, Chen Zesheng (陈泽申), told reporters, "It is our great honor to receive the General-Secretary (President) and we are very proud.....Thank you, the Central Party Committee and the General Secretary (Jinrui Xi 2016a)."

According to data collected by the author as of October 2016, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, has conducted 35 inspections to various localities since taking office in 2012. About 32 percent of them are military- or defense-related, and an equal percentage of inspections are targeted at economic development. In addition, 16 percent of these inspections concern anti-poverty while 19 percent have a focus on political ideology. By comparison, the Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, has conducted just as many inspections as the President, but focusing more on economic development, ranging from promoting academic research, improving basic welfare to perfecting financial regulations.

Inspections, however, are not just a “privilege” for the top Chinese leaders, like the president. Quite the contrary, it is an assumed obligation for officials from almost every level, particularly the head of government. Just a glance over the official websites of any level of Chinese government reveals one of the most glaring features of Chinese politics: inspections. Officials cannot wait to publish their inspection tours as headlines and make known to the people that they are working hard and doing great.

A political practice employed by Chinese dynasties as early as the Qin (221 BC-201 BC), Chinese government inspections found its regenerated value under the CCP governance after it came to power in 1949 (Li Zhigang 2014). Learning from the inspection system by the Soviet Leninists, the CCP adopted inspections as one of the most favored approaches of governance. Chairman Mao was a fervent advocate for inspection tours by party members. He argued in the 1930s, during the beginning years of the CCP, that party members should connect to the people by being physically present in their midst and conducting thorough research into local governance (*shenrujiceng, lianxiqunzhong* 深入基层，联系群众)<sup>1</sup>. That has become a mandate adhered throughout the CCP history by every administration (Jinrui Xi 2016a).

These government inspections generally fall into two categories, internal inspections and external inspections, depending on their objectives (Jinrui Xi 2016a). Inspections aiming at patrolling party members and government officials are internal inspections, for their target is *internal* members of the regime. By contrast, inspections that particularly look into members of

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<sup>1</sup> Or otherwise called Mass Line (群众路线)

the society *external* to the party state, namely ordinary citizens, are external inspections. While internal inspections are mostly conducted by a specific agency, such as the Chinese Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCCDI) or the Supreme People's Procuratorate of the People's Republic of China (SPP-PRC), upon all government officials, external inspections are usually initiated and led by the governor of each level of government.

These two forms of inspections thus serve two mutually reinforcing yet distinctive functions. First, inspections are a mechanism for the CCP's internal policing. Inspections provide one of the most important means for the Party to institute transparency and forestall corruption within. The most prominent example is the recent nationwide anti-corruption campaign under Xi-Li administration. Small but powerful inspection teams are deployed from the central government to headquarters of lower levels of governments to hold accountable officials found guilty of illegal practices. This campaign has thus far removed from office more than 70 provincial government officials, more than those tried in the past three decades combined (Youwei 2015).

Second, inspections are employed to visit ordinary Chinese citizens. My extensive research on external inspections finds that inspections are deployed chiefly to ensure social stability, to boost the economy and to elevate the common welfare (Jinrui Xi 2015). More specifically, the Chinese government is more likely to inspect villages that house investment projects, villages that are poor and villages that are chosen by the government as model villages. Villages with potentials of investments, such as those endowed with natural resources or located at a transportation hub, attract more government inspections, as the government places great emphasis on economic development. Visiting these villages allows the government to ensure a consistent flow of political and financial support for sustained development in these villages. That the Chinese government is more likely to visit model villages, villages set up as examples in development and governance, suggests that the government attempts to advocate success strategies developed by these models across society to benefit those lagging behind. Lastly, that impoverished villages are also more likely to see inspections indicates that the CCP does care about the poor. This trend is even more pronounced under China's current administration. Central to China's nationwide anti-poverty campaign, Xi has paid a number of high-profile personal visits to marginalized villages across China.

## How Do Inspections Help the CCP Stay in Power?

Chinese government inspections contribute to the CCP's enduring rule for a number of reasons. First, Chinese government inspections serve as a propaganda institution for the CCP, in some ways quite similar to election campaigns in democracies, to gain ruling legitimacy. Inspections to localities show the Chinese people that the Party has their best interests in mind and strives accordingly to further those interests. Inspecting officials usually inquire into local implementation of policies, such as whether people have received certain pension funds allocated by the government. What is also common during inspections is that higher officials ask questions on citizens' private lives: the sources of their income, and whether or not they are receiving proper treatment for their illnesses.

For poor households, leaders usually offer them some material gifts to subsidize their expenses. In a visit to a village in Gansu Province in northwest China in 2013, President Xi Jinping brought to Ma Maizhi's (马麦志) house a goat, two bags of flour, one quilt as well as other daily necessities<sup>2</sup>. More subsidiary goods usually flow in after the big figures have left. To villagers in the long-forgotten village in the dusty, isolated mountains in northwest China, the president's arrival, despite the freezing cold, steep and unpaved roads, in addition to his considerate and humble attitude and his heartfelt concern over people's lives, buys their approval of the president's rule in hearts and minds, if not more. Chinese government inspections have thus become an indispensable avenue for the CCP to demonstrate its commitment to serve the people and foster a close relationship between them.

The ingrained notion among the Chinese people of respecting the authority has provided a favorable context for Chinese inspections to achieve maximum public approval for the regime. Particularly, the authority-oriented (*Guanbenwei* 官本位)<sup>3</sup> Chinese culture has critically shaped the Chinese understanding of authority as a governing force, not to be challenged or balance-checked, but to be obeyed, even at the expense of equity and justice<sup>4</sup>. Almost all the Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> "Zhongguo gongchandang xinwenwang" [News Website of the Chinese Communist Party].

<sup>3</sup> An alternative translation could be "authority inclination."

<sup>4</sup> For more details, refer to Feng (2012).

citizens I interviewed in summer 2016 expressed their appreciation of high officials inspecting the grassroots. Arrivals of high officials usually infuse a strong sense of hope and opportunity. It is uncommon for the Chinese poor to blame the authority for their sufferings. They embrace more the mentality of “what we can do for our country” than “what our country can do for us.” Initiatives by the Chinese government to elevate their livelihood, therefore, are, to the villagers, not obligations of the government but an extra “blessing.” Weeks before the former premier, Wen Jiabao, visited Huanxian County (环县) in northwest China in January 2012, thrill and awe already pervaded in that small town and local people waited for the premier with great expectations. Upon Wen’s arrival, throngs of citizens rushed to the streets still covered by snow and ice just to catch a glimpse of their great leader (Field observation, 2012).

Besides the “authority-oriented” cultural advantage, Chinese government inspections also operate in a context of controlled but favorable media under the CCP. The state media offers the maximum coverage of inspection tours by high-profile leaders. Visits, such as the president’s inspection to Yuangudui, are broadcasted nationwide. This convinces the Chinese people across the nation that the CCP is not an idle, abusive agent hungry for power, but that it exists to serve the people and performs its duties as expected. Most news outlets in China are under state-control. Controlled media has a positive impact on Chinese citizens’ approval of the regime (Bernstein and Lu 2000; Li Lianjiang 2004). Even private news firms are not allowed to freely publish content critical of the Party. Most of the time on the media, such as TV broadcast, is primarily reserved for coverage of government leaders’ activities. Taking as an example, *Netease News* (网易)<sup>5</sup>, one of the most independent news networks in China, the front page of the website is almost always occupied by articles reporting the Chinese president and premier. As a result, Chinese government inspections, once conducted and positively reported, garner the most attention from society, of course, for the ruling interest of the CCP.

My empirical research with data analysis finds that that Chinese villagers’ perception of village leadership significantly improves after inspections happen. Villagers tend to “strongly agree” 30 percent more that “the village cadre stands as a spokesman for the peasants (against the higher government once the village does not agree with it)”, mediates village conflicts and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.163.com>

develops village economy, when inspections to their village increase from once to fifty times per year, the highest frequency in the dataset, all else equal (Jinrui Xi 2016b). Government inspections empower village leaders to more effectively administer village affairs. Better financed village leadership has more influence on villagers than its poor counterpart in other villages, because it can accomplish more things that immediately impact the villagers' lives. The political and financial support that inspections bring to village leadership enables it to win support from villagers.

Second, beyond just winning popularity, Chinese government inspections do help the regime legislate effective policies and facilitate their implementation. Leaders of the regime usually take inspection trips to localities to collect local, first-hand information for policy-making. Government inspections appear to have significant monitoring effect on local governance (Liu 2009). In many cases, local governments receive a before-hand notice for the upcoming inspection, which alerts the local officials to “prepare” special households for their inspecting superiors (Interview 2016). The timing of the beforehand notices varies across levels of government. While some come rather late, very close to the actual date of inspections, others would be sent one or two weeks early, giving the local officials more time to get ready. Inspections thus do compel local governments to closely follow decrees from higher government in local governance.

The living conditions of individual households also instantly improve after being visited by a certain high official (Interview, 2016). This happens partially due to the gifts that inspecting officials bring to them. Perhaps more importantly, what causes improved welfare of the inspected households is the significant amount of attention that local governments pay to these households before and after the inspection happens. This increased attention is usually followed by expedited executions of delayed policies, sudden provision of public goods previously withheld in corruption and even intensive “care” of this household to ensure that it is “complaint-free.”

Moreover, inspections provide the most direct and handy path for the Chinese government to hear feedback from the common people, and to accordingly address popular grievances. Instead of waiting for popular dissent to build up and even spiral to a larger scale to capture

higher government's attention, inspections allow Chinese leaders to preemptively prevent potential outburst of mass movements by reaching out to problematic areas. One of the frequently asked questions by inspecting officials is whether there is protest or other forms of social conflicts (Interview 2016).

Third, government inspections mobilize the Chinese people for collective actions. Inspections lead to state-controlled forms of participation. Increased interactions between the government and common Chinese citizens diminish the chances of aggravating and, consequently, spreading popular dissent. Both empirical data and interviews confirm that inspections are one of the most powerful stimuli for participation by Chinese villagers in rural areas, such as attending public meetings and consulting with village leaders regarding village governance (Jinrui Xi 2016a).

Inspections make local officials more available for the grassroots to reach. Inspections pressure local politicians to be more engaging toward the grassroots, making themselves more accessible to villagers. Had inspections not occurred, a chunk of the chances where villagers can now interact with local officials would be absent, simply because local officials are hardly available. As in reality many officials stay out of touch for the public and act as very *niu* (很牛, arrogance or pride in Chinese slang), it can be rather challenging for an ordinary Chinese, without powerful personal connections or impactful credentials, to have an encounter with officials in China (Field observation, 2016).

In addition, Inspections provide essential incentives for villagers to *properly* participate in village politics. Meeting higher officials (*Jiandaguan* 见大官) may foster potentially personal networks that can benefit individual households. In a personal network-oriented (*Guanxihua* 关系化) society<sup>6</sup>, knowing someone in a prominent government position implies, in many instances, shortcuts to access both material benefits and promotional advantages into higher positions.

Fourth, inspections, given their popularity, draw social attention towards the political leaders. This brings unity and conformity toward the political ideology that the CCP propagates.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on *Guanxi*, refer to Pei (2006, pp. 186); Lu (2000, pp. 130).



A particular feature of President Xi Jinping's visits to localities is that he always delivers a speech on national governance while visiting. Some of those speeches later become decrees for party governance, while others later coalesce into the ideological doctrine of the CCP and are written into the Party Statute and the Constitution. The Chinese masses are thus "educated" to remain united by abiding by the CCP's leadership. For instance, reporting the president's inspection (as well as other tours including state visits to other countries), the Chinese national media constantly reminds its audience that the entire nation shall unite behind the leadership team under Xi Jinping.

### **Not Perfect**

However, the conduct of government inspections is not flawless. One of the most peculiar shortcomings of inspections, as my research shows, is that government inspections tend to cluster around an extremely small number of localities. In my research, I find that most of these intensely inspected villages are geographically closer to urban cities and their economies tend to be far better off than the average (Jinrui Xi 2015). While some of this cluster is justified by the higher administrative demand in a more developed village economy, most of it is driven by local corporatism practices where local officials and business groups collude for mutual personal benefits. Conducting inspections is not cheap. Unnecessary inspections are a waste of valuable resources that can otherwise be used to power local economic development. Many local leaders have expressed in interviews the unnecessary distraction excessive inspections have caused to local development. By contrast, some of the most remote and underdeveloped villages have been left unnoticed and unattended.

Second, inspection officials sometimes miss the "blind spots". To please the inspecting superiors, many local officials arrange inspectors' itineraries along the path where the villages are most developed and best governed (You 2012, pp. 97; Interview 2016). One particular example is when local officials camouflaged the route on which inspectors' entourage were to arrive with high-built and whitened walls hiding sluggish village houses behind (Liu 2009, pp.118). High officials, as a result, do not always observe the actual development in rural areas. What they see is rather a manufactured, manipulated illusion of prosperity.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the imperfections of the Chinese inspection system, it, nevertheless, remains and will continue to remain a significant part of Chinese politics. Marketing the CCP as a benevolent and capable ruling agent, Chinese government inspections markedly distinguish the CCP from similar authoritarian regimes in the world, both in the processes and the outcomes of Chinese politics. While inspections assist the CCP in maintaining its ruling longevity, they also provide it with an essential means to explore the optimal ruling mechanisms, ideologically and practically, within the unique cultural and social-economic context of China. Even when inspections are nothing more than a political game, it is worthwhile to play it, for the interests of both the Chinese people and the ruling regime.

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