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## **Elite Power Competition and Corruption Investigation in China: A Case Study**

Jiangnan Zhu Hui Li

### **Abstract**

This article proposes an investigation-trigger framework to explain the process that stimulates investigations of corruption in China, which was treated more as a black box in the past. Reviewing China's current anticorruption system, we argue that local party leaders' decisions directly trigger corruption investigations, and that power competition between political elites is a major catalyst of the trigger. Moreover, drawing upon rarely accessible documentation and interviews addressing the successive downfalls of two public security bureau chiefs in City H, we identify two channels for the investigation-trigger catalyst to work: the diminished patronage of corrupt officials after patron turnovers, and government insiders' unconventional provocation of political opponents. The cases also show that outside intervention may rupture the local protection of corruption and facilitate investigations. This finding supports the 2012 reform of China's corruption control system.

**Keywords:** elite power competition, anticorruption, corruption investigation, patron, insider provocateurs

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Corruption in China has deepened across sectors, expanded to different government levels, and constantly changed formats since the 1990s (Gong, 1997; Wedeman, 2004; Guo, 2008; Wang, 2013; Manion, 2014; Pei, 2016). While tracing the trends and sources of corruption in China, scholars have also examined aspects of the anticorruption system, including its general institutional design (e.g. Manion, 2004), the history and structure of its primary anticorruption agency—the Central Disciplinary Inspection Committee (CDIC) (e.g. Young, 1984; Guo, 2014), the disciplinary organs’ relations with the party (Gong, 2008; Sapio, 2008), the CDIC’s recent development (e.g. Fu, 2015; Manion, 2016; Li, 2016), and the role of other agencies, such as the procuratorate, in anticorruption (e.g. Li and Deng, 2015). An enduring problem in Chinese anticorruption practices, as noted by many scholars, is that a large majority of the cases received by the anticorruption organizations are not investigated (Manion, 2004; Wedeman, 2005; Cai, 2015). A speech by the current Party General Secretary, Xi Jinping, further highlighted the salience of the problem, emphasizing that the number of corruption cases that had accumulated in the past would be reduced as a new way to strengthen anticorruption endeavors (Pan, 2016). Although extant studies have identified several institutional factors that prevent cases from being investigated, little research has explained what kinds of cases in what kinds of situations stimulate corruption investigations in China. Answers to these questions can illuminate the

broader context in which anticorruption decisions are made, further enriching our understanding of the working mechanism of the Chinese anticorruption system.

In this article, we analyze a type of political anticorruption stimulus that usually stays behind the screen of public knowledge—the power competition between local political elites in China. Elite power competition is actually suspected to influence anticorruption enforcement in many countries, especially those with high levels of corruption and weak institutions. For instance, studies conducted in African and former Communist countries have shown that anticorruption endeavors are “often consumed in the vortex of elite wrangling and political ambitions” (Abebanwi and Obadare, 2011: 203; Börzel and Pamuk, 2012). Similarly, scholars of Chinese politics, such as Xuezhi Guo, Melanie Manion, and Susan Shirk, have sharply observed that corruption crackdowns are often initiated to serve certain political purposes and “as a way to solve intra-party power struggles and conflict”, rather than for the “sole aim of tackling malfeasance” (Guo, 2014: 617). Andrew Wedeman (2017) and Jiangnan Zhu and Dong Zhang (2016) empirically demonstrated that factional purges can be a motivating factor in anticorruption campaigns in China. The focus of this vein of research is on the leaders who have the capacity to directly initiate corruption investigations. However, another way that anticorruption may be “consumed,” and which is probably more common in practice, is that officials who do not have the direct capacity to launch corruption investigations may try all

means to attract anticorruption agencies and instrumentalize anticorruption to get ahead in the power competition. This second type is the focus of this research.

Taking a process-centric perspective, we propose an investigation-trigger framework based on our extensive field interviews in a prefecture, City H, in X Province. We argue that under the Chinese anticorruption institutions, especially before 2012, the key to trigger corruption investigation upon powerful local political elites, such as officials at or above county/division level (*xian/chu ji* 县处级), is the major local leaders' decision and willingness to investigate them. In a prefecture, major leaders primarily refer to the municipal party committee members, particularly the party secretary, and, secondarily, to leaders of the provincial government. Moreover, intense power competition between local government officials, although not the only factor, can greatly encourage leaders to launch corruption investigations through two main channels. First, the leadership turnovers in a city may simply replace the old factional patrons with new party leaders who have less incentive to protect corrupt followers of former executives. Second, to compete for power, local officials may individually or collectively act as provocateurs by disclosing the corrupt acts of their political opponents. The unconventional means adopted by the insider provocateurs, such as spreading the corruption information of and setting political traps for rivals, may foster opportunities for and pressure party leaders to investigate corruption. In the triggering process, local patron-client power networks may help to

advance connected officials' standing in elite competition and also get them involved in escalated power struggles. Hence, power networks between officials greatly shape the direction, scope and outcome of corruption investigations. Publicized government decisions to investigate corruption may only be the end results of long-term and sophisticated intra-party elite power struggles.

Therefore, our study contributes to the literature on political stimuli of anticorruption in authoritarian regimes. Because concrete evidence is hard to obtain, there is a lack of research on the detailed pathways connecting elite contention and anticorruption. Our in-depth case studies illustrate the major channels via which elite power competition evolves into corruption investigations by tracing "who overtakes whom" in what ways (Trotsky, 1925). Our cases also reveal how corruption investigations occur in "a locally based bottom-up manner" (Gong, 2015: 685), thus complementing extant studies that mainly probe the top-down anticorruption approaches used by the central government. Finally, learning the process evoking anticorruption helps understand why China's corruption control system, although ineffective, still prevents corruption from completely freewheeling (Wedeman, 2012), a question ultimately related to the endurance of China's authoritarian regime (Nathan, 2003).

In the rest of the article, we first present the "investigation-trigger" framework, followed by a detailed recount of how we secured access to the rarely publicized political documents on

corruption investigations of two heads of the local public security bureau (PSB) in City H. We then contextualize the analytic framework in the cases of City H. The last section concludes the article with a discussion.

## **An Investigation-Trigger Framework on Anticorruption in Local Government**

### ***Disciplinary Organs' Formal Processing Procedures and Investigation Ratios***

The leading anticorruption organization in China is the Central Disciplinary Inspection Committee (CDIC), together with its local Disciplinary Inspection Committees (DICs), which are supplemented by the Ministry of Supervision (merged with DICs at local level from 1993) and the procuratorate. The DICs are responsible for “countering a complex of deviant tendencies classified as degeneration of party style (*dangfeng* 党风)”, ranging from ideological deviation and official disobedience to various acts of economic misconduct (Young, 1984: 24-31). A core dimension of their job since the amendment of the Party Charter in 1982 has been to investigate the corruption of political elites (Li, 2016). With the “first mover” advantage, the DICs usually investigate cases before other agencies and decide whether to transfer them to the procuratorate for further investigation and prosecution (Manion, 2004). The prefectural-level DICs are structured according to their superior counterparts at the provincial and central levels.

The DICs handle corruption reports by following five major steps: receiving cases related to violation of party regulations and administrative rules through both government internal channels (e.g., transferred from individual leaders, other departments and higher-level governments) and public channels such as letters, phone calls, online reports and personal visits (*shou li* 受理); preliminary verification of evidence and materials accepted by DICs (*chubu heshi* 初步核实); filing a case in the DIC having jurisdiction (*li an* 立案); investigating and collecting evidence of regulation violation (*diao cha* 调查); and transferring a case to hearing offices for disciplinary or administrative punishment (*yisong shenli* 移送审理).<sup>1</sup> In this procedure, thousands of cases are reported to DICs at different administrative levels annually. However, no more than one-third of them are filed and even fewer are investigated and punished. For example, Figure 1.1 shows that from 1994 to 2013, among the cases reported to all of the DICs nationwide, only 11-18% were filed for investigation (i.e., the grey line). The majority of the cases reported to the DICs are ignored (Guo, 2014). Figure 1.2 shows that although the situation varies across provinces, the case to filing ratio in most provinces was as low as 0.05-15%, with only seven provinces reaching 16-30%.

**Figure 1.1 Inserted Here**

**Figure 1.2 Inserted Here**



Undeniably, numerous reported cases lack sufficient evidence to be filed. Cases are sometimes repeatedly reported through different channels, which inflates the number of corruption reports and lowers the filing and investigation rates. However, even when taking these factors into consideration, the cases that are formally filed and investigated are still a small minority of those received by DICs, indicating that reports of corruption are not automatically funnelled into investigations. Many factors, such as bureaucratic foot-dragging, poor training of anticorruption agents and limited inspection commission personnel, tend to prevent DICs from proactively investigating cases (Sullivan, 1984).<sup>2</sup> This prompts the question: When do DICs investigate cases, especially those involving local senior officials?

***Direct Trigger: Party Leaders' Willingness to Fire at Corruption***

Whether a case is investigated primarily depends on the local party committee's willingness to investigate and punish the perpetrators. Since the amendment of Party Charter in 1956, the supervisory power of the party committees over their corresponding DICs has been strengthened by changing their role from providing "advisory guidance" (*zhidao* 指导) to "direct" (*lingdao* 领导) DICs work (Li, 2016: 457). Although DIC heads are usually standing members of the party committees at the respective administrative levels, indicating the distinctive status of DICs, the DICs and other anticorruption organizations in China are essentially subordinate to the leadership of their corresponding party committees, which control

DICs' budgets and personnel, and coordinate specific investigation-related work (Manion, 2004; Li, 2016). Just as cases related to officials at or above vice-ministerial or deputy-provincial levels first must be approved by all of the members of the Politburo Standing Committee before being accepted by the CDIC (Guo, 2014), decisions to file and investigate a case involving a county-level official must be approved by the party committee at the prefectural level. A DIC officer told us, "We cannot investigate a case on our own without a nod of our local party secretary".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the resolve of local party committee, especially the party secretary, to investigate a case constitutes the basic trigger of corruption investigation.

In addition, under the dual leadership system introduced in 1982, a prefectural DIC is hierarchically subject to the leadership of its provincial counterpart. Vertical leadership was strengthened in 2004 by the empowerment of the upper-level DICs, which can direct lower branches and step in a lower-level jurisdiction to investigate local leaders. Intervention from upper-level DICs often conveys upper-level party committees' intent to check a corruption case, which is hard for local party committees to ignore. Thus, pressure from upper-level governments also contributes to directly triggering corruption investigations. However, vertical leadership over local DICs has not always been effective in the past (Fu, 2015; Manion, 2016). Most cases cannot bypass local officials reaching higher-level DICs, and upper-level DICs must rely on local governments' cooperation to mount a case (Guo, 2014). Hence, we further classify the

direct trigger into two levels: the investigative willingness and decisions of local top-party leaders who have direct jurisdiction over a case as the front-line (primary) trigger of corruption investigation, and higher-level government pressure as the top-down (secondary) trigger.

Existing research has identified several factors hindering the direct trigger from working effectively. For instance, if the powerful party committees, especially the party secretary who leads the committee, want to protect a corrupt official, they can disapprove of or stop a corruption investigation (Manion, 2004; Guo, 2014). Reasons for protection vary from *guanxi* lobbying networks and local governments prioritizing economic development and social stability over anticorruption to selective enforcement of law (O'Brien and Li, 1999; Sapio, 2005). However, what circumstances incentivize party leaders to pull the trigger on investigation?

### ***Trigger Catalyst: Elite Power Competition***

We propose that some factors inside and outside of the government may act as catalysts incentivizing party leaders to pull the trigger on investigation. A survey of scandals in 25 states in the Middle East and North Africa conducted by Kate Gillespie and Gwenn Okruhlik (1991) shows that without institutional guarantees to curb corruption, anticorruption endeavors are often responses to internal or external stimuli, such as extreme public dissatisfaction with official corruption. In China, public resentment of corruption exploded into protests and even large-scale

demonstrations, such as in 1989, compelling party leaders to fight corruption and appease public discontent (Lu, 2000; Manion, 2004; Sun, 2004; Wedeman, 2012; Guo, 2014). However, the primary concern of most officials is to manage relations with their peers (Svolik, 2012). Thus, political elites' power competition tends to serve as a more common political catalyst promoting corruption investigations.

In democracies fierce electoral competitions may encourage political parties to accuse their opponents of corruption or ineffective corruption control to win votes (e.g., Welch and Hibbing, 1997; Gordon, 2009). Although lacking the competitive elections between political parties, political elites in China also compete for power, government positions and access to office rewards (Ezrow and Frantz, 2011; Shih, 2016). The issue of official corruption and its control, as observed by Susan Shirk, has emerged as a potent weapon in leadership competition in the post-Mao era. One example is Li Peng discrediting his chief rival Zhao Ziyang in 1988-1989 by accusing him of mismanaging the economy, thereby causing inflation, corruption and reduced grain production during Zhao's tenure as premier (Shirk, 1993: 88). Getting rid of an official through corruption clean-ups also seems to reflect the growing feeling within the leadership that removal should arise from just causes, as emphasized by procedural rules and norm-bound successions in the last few decades (Teiwes, 1984; Nathan, 2003; Cheng Li, 2012). Yongshun Cai (2015) also argues that unlike some types of duty-related malfeasance, which may

be ideologically or legally justifiable, corruption is a crime that should not be easily excused if evidence against an agent is proven. Therefore, the issue of corruption has become a popular tool for resolving intra-elite power competition in China. In other words, while political disputes are resolved through a seemingly “depoliticized” anticorruption process (Li, 2016: 473), anticorruption is sometimes politicized for the purposes of power wrangling. We identify two channels via which elite competition increases local leaders’ willingness to investigate a corrupt official.

#### *Losing patrons, diminished patronage*

Because neither a legal system nor a moral order can fully regulate elite power competition in China, many officials form and join factions to secure power and gain protection (Dimitter, 1995; Pye, 1995; Shih, 2004). Scholars generally agree that factions are informal groups within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) parent organization that are bound by shared backgrounds (e.g. hometown ties, schoolmates), intertwined careers (i.e. colleagues), bureaucratic responsibilities and common loyalty to their leaders (Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988; Nathan and Tsai, 1995; Huang, 2000; Shih, 2004). Factions incorporate a series of patron–client pairs in which patrons are high-level officials and clients are a coterie of second-rank leaders who can be patrons of their own subordinates (Liu, 1983). The patron-client networks are

based on exchange, through which patrons and clients seek power, positions, and wealth (Nathan and Tsai, 1995; Shih, 2008). In corruption investigations, patrons are often incentivized to protect their clients, because a client's fall can be considered a sign of the patron's weakness and may even implicate patrons themselves.

However, when old patrons lose power through retirement or removal, the patronage enjoyed by their clients often subsequently diminishes. New leaders usually have little incentive to protect corrupt officials who are followers of their predecessors, unless they share strong relationships. Even if newcomers do not initiate corruption investigations that proactively target specific local officials, they usually do not hinder investigations, which may potentially help to legitimize their rule and weaken the informal power left by previous patrons (Gillespie and Okruhlik, 1991). For example, Mu Suixin, the infamously corrupt mayor of Shenyang, frequently ignored provincial leaders' requirements and obstructed the investigation of his subordinates. However, after he was arrested, his followers in important government positions were quickly investigated and prosecuted (*Worker Daily*, 2001). Victor Shih and Jonghyuk Lee (2016) empirically showed that patrons' removal indeed is more likely to result in clients' demotion and removal. Thus, leadership turnovers of local factional patrons, such as local party secretaries, can boost local leaders' willingness to investigate powerful officials who were previously immune to investigation.

To further detect the trend, we compared the yearly differences in the number of cases filed for investigation by the DICs from 1994 to 2013 (Figure 2). We found that in years without leadership turnovers (“normal years”), the mean of the first difference was almost zero, indicating that the total number of cases investigated by the DICs was about the same from year to year in most provinces. During the turnover years, an average of 90 fewer cases were investigated than in normal years, very likely because the DICs intentionally slowed down the processing of cases given the busy time and political uncertainties associated with local leadership changes. In contrast, in the year immediately after leadership turnovers, an average of 150 more cases were investigated than in the previous year across provinces, a strong sign of corrupt officials’ diminished patronage after leadership turnovers.

**Figure 2 Inserted Here**

*Insider provocateurs lift the lid*

To compete for power, local government officials sometimes act as provocateurs against their political opponents. According to a local DIC official of Henan province, at least 50% of corruption accusations sent to DICs during personnel changes were submitted by officials aiming to undermine their political competitors.<sup>4</sup> After all, “damaging information can be found on almost anyone” in politics if they are examined closely for long enough (Tumber and Waisbord, 2004: 1034). “Knowledge about corrupt acts is available to political actors as a function of their

proximity to the acts” (Balán, 2011: 461). Hence, compared with government outsiders, officials are more likely to have first-hand access to such information. Yet as insiders, they know that corruption reports in conventional ways, such as anonymous letters, phone calls, and even personal visits, are often ignored. Thus, these “insider-provocateurs” may use unconventional means to attract local leaders’ attention and prompt anticorruption organizations to investigate their political opponents. For instance, they may use various strategies to trap their rivals into administrative faults, which creates opportunities for local party leaders to conduct further investigations implicating their opponents’ corrupt activities. Thus, although the insider provocateurs to some extent fulfill the role of whistle blowers, they are motivated by more selfish reasons and are much more politically savvy, in contrast to whistle blowers who are largely driven by professional norms and their personal values and are “organizationally naïve” (Rothschild and Miethe, 1999: 119).

In addition, competing leaders often have their respective factional followers. “Political factions are very sensitive to changes that can directly affect members’ political well-being”. Any rise or fall of a major leader in the factional chain “can set off a series of domino responses among the factional networks [that] extend throughout the system” (Huang, 2000: 82). Thus, individual elites’ struggles can ultimately result in factional infighting. Factional members, whose interests are threatened by opposing factions, may converge into an “insider provocateur



group” that is more willing to publicly denounce their opponents’ corrupt behaviour and arouse the attention of society and higher-level officials. For example, Zhu Ruifeng, the independent anticorruption journalist famous for posting the sexual video of Chongqing official Lei Zhengfu online, confessed that 90% of the explosive revelations of corruption were sent to him by government insiders in attempts to implicate their opponents in scandals.<sup>5</sup> Corruption scandals may raise social outcries and create government image crises, further encouraging party leaders to investigate corruption.

We depict the investigation-trigger framework in Figure 3, illustrating how elite power competition catalyzes the direct triggering of corruption investigations through the two channels identified above. In both channels, the power networks of local leadership tend to underlie the process, influencing the scope and outcomes of corruption investigations. In the following, we contextualize the framework using the cases of two former City H PSB heads. For each case, we first introduce elite power competition as the starting point and then explain how the two channels lead to corruption investigation.

### **Figure 3 Inserted Here**

### **Data and Methods**

Accessing the inner politics of political elites is always challenging. We collected our cases from City H using personal connections. City H was designated as a prefecture of an inland

province, X, in the early 1970s. City H has a mid-sized population of approximately two million as of 2016. In terms of geographical features and average education levels, it is similar to other inland prefectures. More importantly, the anticorruption structure of prefectures is very much the same across China. Therefore, studying the anticorruption procedure in City H can also clarify the general practices in local government.

From 2009 to 2014, we collected two types of first-hand information in City H. First, we interviewed 46 people involved in the two cases. They range from anticorruption decision-makers to insider-provocateurs such as local party leaders, PSB officers, DIC staffs and procurators. Three rounds of interviews were conducted in July 2009, January 2011 and October to December of 2014, with the focus on the basic information of City H and its general bureaucracy, then the DIC, Audit Bureau and Anticorruption Bureau under the municipal procuratorate, and finally the details of the two corruption cases. Using our personal connections, we were able to conduct multiple in-depth interviews (i.e., more than one hour) with six key figures involved in the case investigations. Our second type of information includes the case archives (*anjian juanzong* 案件卷宗) maintained by the local procuratorate and DIC. The archives include letters reporting corruption of the PSB heads; the government's decisions to file, investigate and punish the two officials; relevant interrogation notes; appraisal letters from related organizations; and confessions from the two leaders.

Our article is largely based on the interviews, as the deep-seated political reasons behind investigation are not recorded in archives. However, we have implicitly utilized the archival information to understand the relations between the cases' key characters. The prolonged information collection process also provided us with an unexpected advantage. Many officials in charge of the two cases gradually retired and were more willing to discuss them. For example, a retired party secretary of City H disclosed many behind-the-scenes stories, such as the city's factional networks, which are extremely valuable to this research.

### **Elite Power Struggles and the Downfall of Two Public Security Chiefs**

#### ***Background: PSB Chiefs in the Power Network of City H***

The two cases involve two persons: LU and JING, who were heads of the PSB of City H successively from 1998 to 2003.<sup>6</sup> Being chiefs of an important local coercive institution, both PSB heads were members of the municipal standing committee, the core decision-making body of the city.<sup>7</sup> LU and JING were consecutively dismissed for corruption between 2001 and 2003 and sentenced to 15 years and 14 years of imprisonment in 2002 and 2005, respectively. More importantly, they were both embedded in the complex power network of City H. As illustrated in Figure 4, the two PSB chiefs belonged to different local factions led by their respective patrons, the successive municipal party secretaries, WANG and CHENG.

According to a former party secretary of City H, high-level officials of City H mainly originated from three nearby areas. Hence, affinity to geographical origins provides the primary basis for factional alignments among officials in City H, as in many other places in China.<sup>8</sup> On top of the geographical connections, as the retired party secretary revealed, “Whether officials from the same place can form a strong faction mainly depends on whether one of them can emerge as the topmost leader of City H, the party secretary. The party secretary has personnel power, which is the major factor fostering a faction”.<sup>9</sup> For example, WANG held two consecutive terms as the party secretary from 1988 to 1997, longer than any party secretaries in the history of City H. During his ten-year term, most officials promoted by him were from his hometown. In this way, he established a massive factional network.<sup>10</sup>

Party Secretary WANG’s hegemony, especially on personnel issues, dissatisfied Mayor CHENG, who was forced to construct his own informal network for career security.<sup>11</sup> CHENG recruited supporters primarily from officials originating in other provinces, as they had often been excluded by local factions and were eager to seek strong patronage. Thus, LU, as a demobilized army cadre transferred to City H from outside, quickly became a follower of CHENG. He was first assigned as the director general in the Foreign Economic and Trade Committee (FETC) of City H and then promoted to the PSB head after CHENG replaced WANG as the party secretary.

LU's successor in PSB was JING. Unlike LU's close relationship with his patron CHENG, JING was only a loose follower of Party Secretary WANG, mainly on the basis of the geographical closeness to JING's hometown. Actually, instead of developing a close relationship with WANG, JING seemed to be more interested in locally expanding his own family's influence. Several of his family members and relatives held important positions in City H. His power proliferation later irked many local officials, including BANG, a loose ally of WANG who succeeded CHENG as party secretary (see Figure 4), and partially augmented local leaders' willingness to investigate JING's corruption issues. From Figure 4, we can clearly see that the power competition between the two successive PSB heads was merely a subset of the contention among higher-level officials of City H.

#### **Figure 4 About Here**

#### ***Power Competition Between the Chief and Deputy Chief of the PSB***

As discussed in the theoretical framework, factional networks include multiple patron-client relations. Although they were clients of the municipal party secretaries, the two PSB heads each developed their own informal power networks within their jurisdiction. For example, during his tenure as the PSB chief from 1998 to 2001, LU actively promoted people who showed loyalty to him. He also sold offices to many of his PSB subordinates, who both paid him money and worshiped him (Appendix A).<sup>12</sup> Thus, selling offices was a way to “kill two birds with one

stone” for LU. Not only could he garner large amounts of money, but also build his own power network by assigning his supporters to important positions in the PSB.

However, “no faction will be able to achieve and maintain overwhelmingly superior power” (Nathan, 1976: 46). People who are excluded from the dominant network tend to form an opposition faction to seek balance. In other words, the more expansive LU’s network was, his rivals became more united in contesting him. JING was indeed the leader of LU’s opposition faction.

When LU was the chief of the PSB, JING was the deputy chief leading crime investigations. According to a co-worker of LU and JING, “JING had a high self-esteem. He looked down upon LU because LU didn’t know anything about the public security system. Instead, JING had expertise and won several official awards. He believed himself the best person for LU’s position for a long time”.<sup>13</sup> To compete for power, JING acted as an insider provocateur against LU.

### ***JING as the Insider Provocateur***

Government insiders, compared to ordinary people, know more about the barriers hindering corruption investigation in routine procedures. Therefore, insider provocateurs may look for alternative routes to reach their goal triggering the corruption investigation of their opponents.

Taking advantage of their proximity to their targets, officials may regularly seek and grasp opportunities that catalyse party leaders' investigation decisions.

JING, as a government insider, knew well that it was almost impossible to merely use a few corruption reports to overturn someone like LU, who held a prominent post and maintained a large patron-client network through nepotism in City H. The municipal party committee and higher-level DIC would only investigate a major official such as LU if he committed a serious dereliction of duties and caused severely adverse effects to City H. Therefore, JING orchestrated a case to frame LU.

In June 1999, JING led the investigation of a massive case of fraudulent value added tax (VAT) invoices. Family members of the prime suspect bribed key PSB leaders, including JING, to obtain a bailout. JING anticipated that the suspect, who was a very violent person and who had been long involved in organized crime, would probably cause more trouble if bailed out. JING agreed to approve a bailout, but right before the final approval he left town, deliberately leaving LU the only person qualified to sign off on it.<sup>14</sup> As expected by JING, the suspect retaliated against the person who took his case to the authorities by shooting him shortly after being released. The case involving false VAT invoices evolved into a vicious homicide, shocking City H. LU, whose signature was on the bailout document, had to bear the

responsibility for negligence. Thus, behind a seemingly haphazard incident was actually the stratagem of a political opponent.

### ***LU's Diminished Patronage***

Another channel that accelerated LU's investigation was his diminished patronage.

Rumours that LU was greedy for bribes had long been circulated throughout City H, dating back to when he worked in the FETC. The local DIC's records showed that there had been frequent letters from the public condemning LU's corruption. Nonetheless, with the protection of LU's patron, Party Secretary CHENG, no follow-up actions were taken against LU.<sup>15</sup>

However, when the homicide occurred, LU's patron CHENG had just retired from his position as party secretary. The new party secretary, BANG, was never a close ally of CHENG, leaving LU without anymore strong protection.<sup>16</sup> As a result, LU was quickly handed to the procuratorate for thorough investigation. The municipal chief prosecutor at the time was a long-time buddy of JING. He swiftly collected evidence of LU's corrupt activities and nailed down his prosecution. One PSB cadre of City H commented, "JING was the primary director of LU's downfall by making a large anticorruption drama".<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, reducing patronage can greatly facilitate corruption investigation. In addition, LU's downfall shows that although insider provocateurs may make a "detour" to frame their



rivals, they will try to sabotage their opponents' return to power by using anticorruption schemes, given that corruption is a less forgivable form of misconduct for officials in China.

### ***Power Struggle Between JING and LU Faction***

As in LU's case, JING's downfall also originated from an internal elite power struggle within the PSB. More importantly, JING's case more vividly reveals how the existence of local power networks may force officials in factional chains into the elite struggle whirlpool and drive the direction and scope of corruption investigation. Due to the prevalence of informal politics in China, relinquishing formal positions, whether for rotation, retirement or even subversion, does not necessarily mean that a leader's influence quickly evaporates in a given area. As long as the leader's factional networks remain, their followers may behave as their legacies and continue to cast a shadow on local political affairs (Huang, 2000). Hence, new leaders' construction and extension of power will threaten the interests of their predecessors' followers. In our case, LU's imprisonment did not mean that his network in the PSB immediately disappeared. Therefore, JING's promotion to PSB chief after LU's removal only precluded the start of a larger scale factional infighting between LU's followers and JING.

Actually followers of LU and JING had conflicting interests in terms of career advancement at all times. The LU faction had always gained the upper hand in the past due to LU's patronage. Consequently, after JING assumed the position as PSB chief, the primary challenge facing him

was that a large majority of PSB staff were LU's followers, which could potentially hinder JING from consolidating power within the PSB. Therefore, JING had purposely destroyed LU's network to prevent his faction from making a later comeback, while painstakingly developing his own factional network within the PSB. PSB officers recalled,

“JING mainly promoted three types of people: people who contributed to LU's downfall; people who were considered trustworthy by JING, such as his relatives, hometown natives, and his mistresses; and people who came from rich or powerful backgrounds”.<sup>18</sup>

To hire and promote the people he favoured, JING used various tactics to evade open competition and the strict scrutiny emphasized in the new rules of personnel recruitment and promotion promulgated in 2002 (Sun, 2008; Zeng, 2016). He also appointed excessive numbers of officials beyond the PSB quota and sold offices to subordinates to advance his own supporters. Within only six months of August 2001 when JING formally assumed PSB chief, he had already promoted 93 cadres and dismissed many competent people with good reputations. In this way, he established a group of his own close followers. Appendix B summarizes the major strategies used by JING to manipulate personnel and promote his supporters.

JING's frequent adjustment of cadre corps turned the PSB chaotic. Moreover, during the personnel reshuffle, many of LU's former followers were either removed from office by JING or

unable to obtain further promotion. People from LU faction complained of being greatly marginalized.<sup>19</sup> They were, therefore, angered not primarily by JING's financial problems but his abuse of personnel authorities to dismiss people from LU faction while concurrently expanding his own powerbase. JING's harsh approach to the LU faction and excessive promotion of his own henchmen eventually encouraged LU's followers to converge into an insider-provocateur group, fiercely resisting him within the PSB.

### ***LU Faction Being the Insider-Provocateur Group***

Officials who choose to organize into provocateur groups are usually desperate to protect themselves and perceive themselves as politically weaker than their opponents. They resort to collective action to advance themselves in power competitions. Thus, they are more likely to go to extreme lengths to expose their opponents' corrupt acts, such as disclosing them to the public, in the hope of defeating them relying on social pressures or higher-level government's hand.

LU's faction is an example.

Members of LU faction were just as familiar with local power competition as JING. They knew that a few perfunctory letters complaining of JING's corruption were insufficient to overturn him and, therefore, adopted some new strategies. Officers publicly advertised small character posters exposing JING's wrongdoings across City H five times. This bold move caught municipal leaders' attention and escalated the conflict with JING. Agitated by the posters, JING

deployed a large number of policemen to places where the posters may appear. Furthermore, he used PSB equipment to tap telephone conversations between important leaders of City H, and ordered police officers to examine all of the correspondence within the PSB; with municipal leaders, provincial PSB leaders and offices; and with the Ministry of Public Security. He also detained all correspondence reporting him.<sup>20</sup>

Seeing the danger and the limited circulation of the posters, LU faction began spreading the word through mobile text messages. As recalled by recipients, the short message consisted of a comic verse about JING's bribery cases, having mistresses and promoting cadres that had violated the rules. In a small city of two million people, information spreads quickly. This special kind of reporting soon reached the mobiles of prominent leaders of key departments, such as leaders of the local DIC. It also fomented widespread rumours in City H and severely damaged the reputations of JING and his family. Thus, an elite power struggle within the government developed into a government public image crisis through the acts of the insider provocateur group.

### ***Higher-Level Government Pulled the “Top-Down Trigger”***

As discussed previously, even with dual leadership, it is difficult for most corruption reports to reach higher-level DICs, much less activate the “top-down trigger” of corruption investigation. Unconventional reports of corruption by insider provocateur groups tend to instigate larger social

reactions, which help capture higher-level governments' attention and prevent governments from ignoring the problem. LU's faction's text message tactic proved to be an effective catalyst of the top-down trigger of investigation.

Extremely angry with the text message, JING requested investigation of the messages from the provincial PSB via his personal connections, claiming defamation by cadres of City H. The provincial PSB sent members jointly with the provincial DIC to City H right after receiving JING's report and arrested the mid-level cadres who spread the text messages. However, the provincial PSB and DIC could not simply side with an official because of his status and personal connections to them for a case with such large social repercussions. They asked the municipal DIC of City H to initiate a comprehensive investigation of the factuality of the text message claims regarding JING's corruption.

The provincial leaders finally found that the accusations extended beyond slander and warranted further investigation of JING. Therefore, in this case JING was over-confident about his influence at provincial level. Despite his personal connections with some provincial PSB officials, it was not possible to take advantage of upper-level leaders. The provincial PSB for City H is more powerful and politically neutral. A DIC officer handling this case commented,

“JING smashed his feet with the stones in his hands. Never had he thought that when provincial forces were involved in the matter, he would no longer have control over

it. Had JING dealt with the matter within City H in a low-profile manner and not drawn on support from provincial-level officials, the case may have turned out differently, or at least he would not have set fire to himself so quickly”.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, when a relatively neutral force was brought into a locality, an originally political struggle transitioned into a genuine anticorruption endeavour.

### *JING's Diminished Patronage*

In addition to the top-down trigger, power transitions of local leaders catalysed the front-line trigger of corruption investigation in JING's case. The genuine factional protection of JING from his direct patron WANG had faded with the turnover of party secretaries in City H. As Figure 3 depicts, JING and LU held different positions in their respective factions. LU was directly appointed by CHENG as the PSB chief. Thus CHENG's protection of LU was quite strong. However, CHENG stayed as party secretary for only one term and was far less powerful in City H than WANG. Once he retired, LU immediately lost factional protection and fell. By contrast, in between JING and his patron, WANG, there was a new party secretary, BANG. When CHENG was the party secretary, BANG was the mayor. Although WANG was retired at the time, he used BANG to contain CHENG's influence so as to maintain his factional interests (e.g., interests for himself and his family members). BANG understood that he was only acting as WANG's agent in City H's entire power network. However, being one of the few local leaders

with a university education in City H, BANG wanted more than to merely be WANG's puppet. BANG was also born in a different province and was a complete outsider of City H, unlike many of his colleagues. He was reluctant to become involved in the complex factions of either WANG or CHENG. Therefore, although close with WANG in appearance, BANG was rather independent in reality and he did not firmly conform to any one of the existing factions in City H. After assuming the position of party secretary of City H, BANG fervently wished to break away from WANG's control. He intended to balance different factions left by his predecessors and reduce their influence on local politics so that he could work more independently. Therefore, BANG had little incentive to offer strong protection to JING. Meanwhile, during BANG's reign, the head of the local DIC, who also originated from an outside province, held a similar position as BANG in the factional networks of City H. Although appearing to be close to WANG, the DIC head was actually relatively independent. When WANG lost his authority, the DIC head no longer had strong incentives to protect other members of WANG's faction.

Moreover, the overexpansion of power networks can deprive a leader's patronage and alliance from other officials and cripple him or her during corruption investigations. The expansive influence of JING and his family members irritated the new party secretary, BANG, and other prefectural leaders, further reducing their willingness to protect him from corruption investigation. JING as the PSB chief controlled more than 1,000 policemen. In addition, as

shown in Figure 3, nine members of JING's family worked in key offices in City H, five of them were county-level officials and two were the municipal standing committee members. Rumours circulated that JING's family met weekly to discuss how to further expand their influence in City H. The rumours actually reflected that many local senior and mid-level officials felt threatened by and jealous of JING's family, who locally monopolized many political resources. Thus, when the provincial DIC officially ordered a corruption investigation of JING, the local party committee and DIC were more or less pushing the boat along the river.

### **Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

This article proposes an investigation-trigger framework to understand the process stimulating corruption investigation in China, which has been treated more as a black box in the past. This new perspective can help identify linchpins that vitalize formal institutions in the corruption control system and make them function more effectively. A review of the working procedures and investigation rates of DICs essentially shows that anticorruption agencies in China are reactive, requiring external triggers, especially local and higher-level party leaders' decisions, to begin corruption investigations. This study examines the cases of the two PSB chiefs of City H to explore how local political elite power competitions catalyze party leaders' investigation decisions.



Although the selection of locality and the cases were very much restricted by the author's personal connections, the political logic behind the corruption investigations is by no means limited to the two case in City H. Recently, the former prefectural party secretaries of several cities, including Maoming and Meizhou in Guangdong province, Hengyang in Hunan province, Nanjing in Jiangsu province, Kunming in Yunnan province, and Sanmenxia in Henan province, have been brought down by corruption.<sup>22</sup> The downfalls of these officials all involved internal elite power struggles resulting in mutual corruption denunciations. In fact, according to Minxin Pei (2016), a majority of Chinese corruption were uncovered due to officials' allegations and counter-allegations, implicating more people in the same or different transgressions, although some of the allegations also aim at legal leniency rather than power competition solely. With the penetration of the Internet, online posting, such as pictures and videos of officials engaged in sex acts, has become a new and popular way of revealing corruption. Although some of those posts were from average netizens, a majority of them are actually disclosed directly or indirectly by officials in opposition of their political opponents. In light of this, Chinese officials behave no differently from politicians of other countries with multiparty competitions. For example, Manuel Balán (2011: 461) found that in Latin America "most original revelation or leaks of government corruption come from actors inside [of the] government" to either get ahead in coalitions or to jump ship to opposition parties.

An issue that we have not explored deeply is the temporal order of the two major channels that turn elite power competition into corruption investigation. Based on the two cases, we may infer that insiders' provocation tends to be a prerequisite that alerts local leaders to existing corruption. The insider provocateurs play the same role as whistle blowers, although they instrumentally utilize anticorruption to serve their own political interests. Diminished patronage is an important condition that accelerates incumbent leaders' decisions to pursue investigations. LU's case indicates that local patronage of corrupt officials is an obstacle that hinders investigations. Meanwhile, JING's downfall demonstrates that if the top-down trigger (i.e., higher-level government in the province) is dragged in, it is still possible to initiate an investigation. However, a more direct way to start an investigation is always to pull the front-line trigger (i.e., leaders in the prefecture), which is more closely associated with the turnover of local patrons. Therefore, local patron turnover may facilitate insider provocateurs' disclosure of their political opponents' corruption, as their opponents' protection is gone. This probably explains why both channels were seen working simultaneously in the two cases in City H. Future research should use cases that allow for the examination of the effects of each condition separately.

The case studies also illuminate the complicated relationships between political elite power competition, factional infightings, and anticorruption, which have often been debated, especially during the large-scale anticorruption campaign launched by Xi Jinping in 2012. First,

party leaders who initiate corruption investigations are not necessarily the ones who want to proactively use anticorruption to advance in elite power competitions. In our case, neither LU nor JING are considered political opponents of Party Secretary BANG, who decided to investigate them. It could be lower-level officials who instrumentalize anticorruption investigations to compete for power. They may use all means, including unconventional methods of fostering opportunities and pressures, to encourage or force party leaders to make investigation decisions. Second, factional infightings may neither be the means nor the ends of anticorruption. Instead, they may be the outcomes of individual elite power competitions. For example, the investigation of LU largely resulted from his power competition with JING at an individual level. However, in a political system plagued by informal power networks, rivalry between individual leaders is often embedded in more complex factional struggles and can easily escalate into larger scale factional infightings. In our case, this led to JING's downfall. Thus, anticorruption is not necessarily motivated by factional infightings, however the prevalence of factional networks can strongly influence the final outlook of anticorruption.

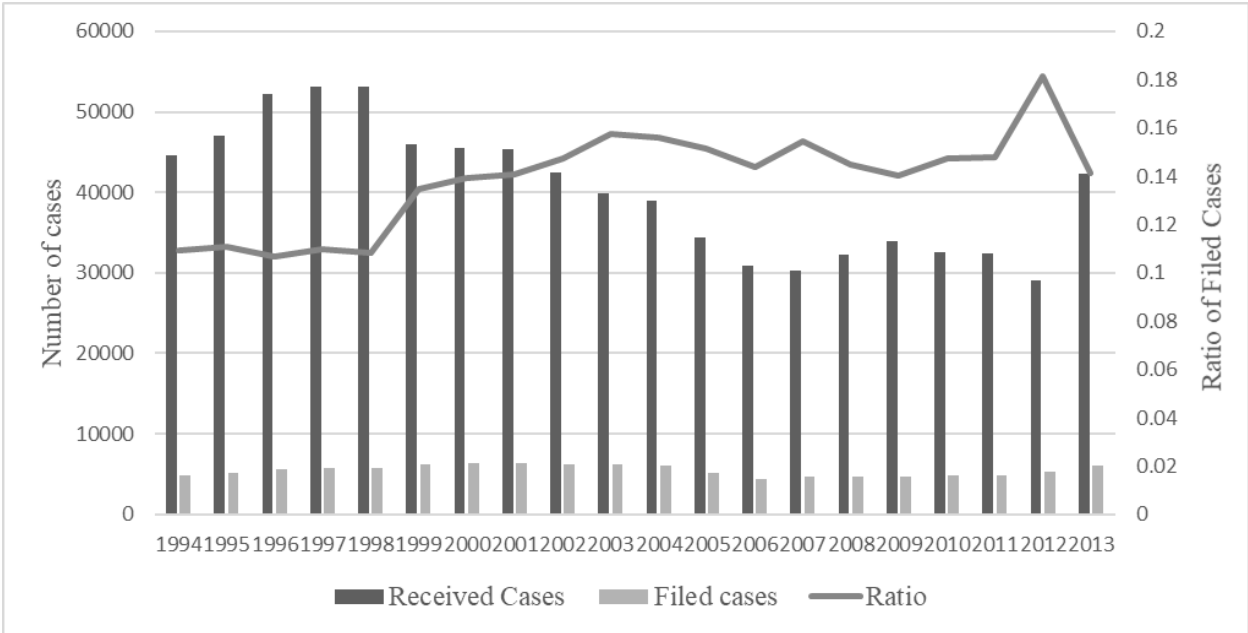
Drawing these insights together, we propose that elite power competition and factional infighting help expose local corruption and facilitate anticorruption. These observations also shed light on contentious elite politics (Shih, 2016), as we can speculate that places and time periods undergoing leadership turnovers tend to accompany more intense elite power

competition and are therefore more likely to see higher-intensity corruption investigations.

Figure 2 tentatively shows the correlation between higher investigation rates and the year immediately after power transitions. Future research should explore this further.

In addition to the anticorruption stimuli within a local government, JING's case indicates that outside intervention can breach local factional protection of corruption and turn an originally politically motivated corruption report into a normal investigation. In particular, upper-level governments and DICs are relatively neutral forces compared to local politics. Officials rotated from the outside may dilute local power networks and tend to support the investigation of pre-existing corruption. Several new anticorruption measures implemented under Wang Qishan's leadership of the CDIC after 2012 seem to parallel these findings. For instance, the hierarchical leadership over local DICs has been greatly strengthened by enhancing the CDIC's personnel power, appointing provincial DIC secretaries from the central government, rejuvenating the central circuit inspection teams and emphasizing the consistency of the local DIC with the CDIC (Fu, 2015; Manion, 2016; Yeo, 2016). All of these measures may, to some extent, fight local protection over corruption.

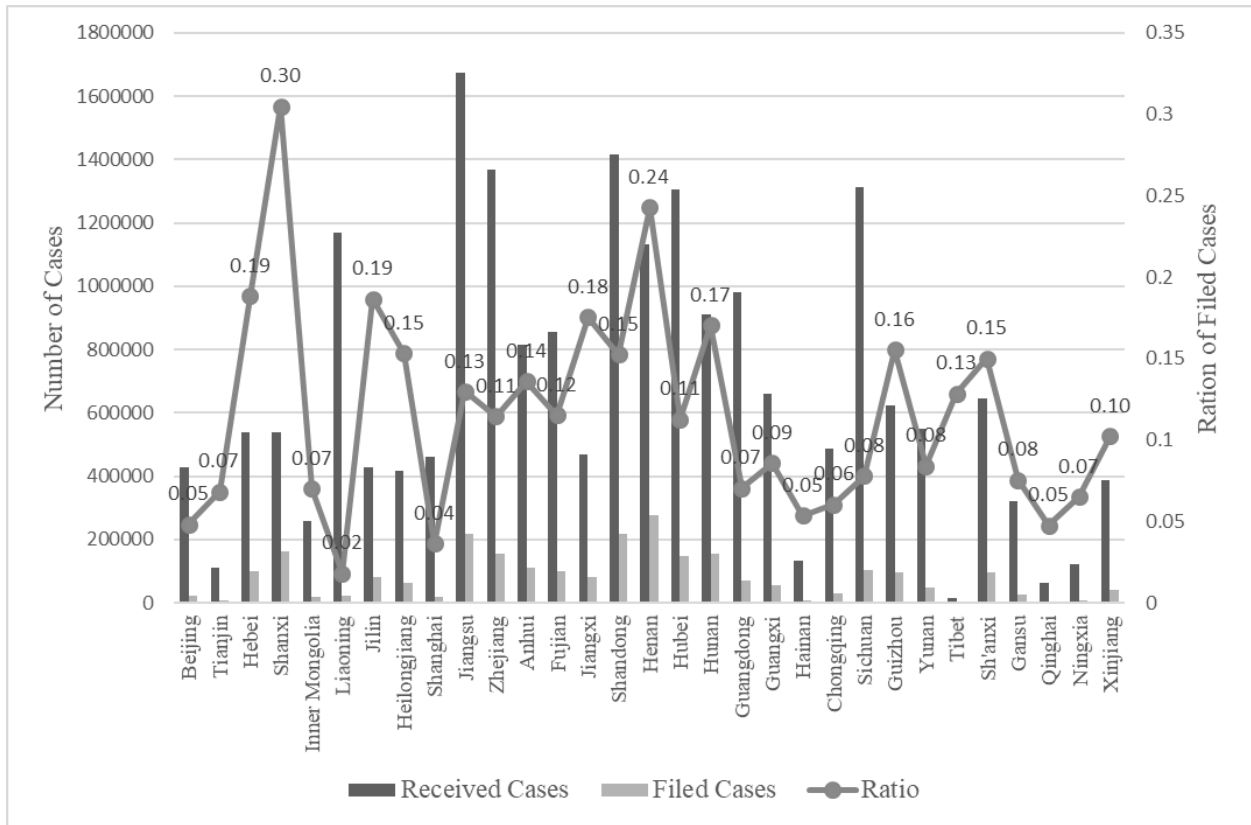
**Figure 1.1.** Filed cases vs. received cases by DICs nationwide, 1994-2013.



Data source: Data were collected from each province’s annual provincial yearbooks published between 1994 and 2013.

Notes: We summarized the data of all of the provinces in each year to obtain the national total across years. The ratio is the portion of filed cases to received cases.

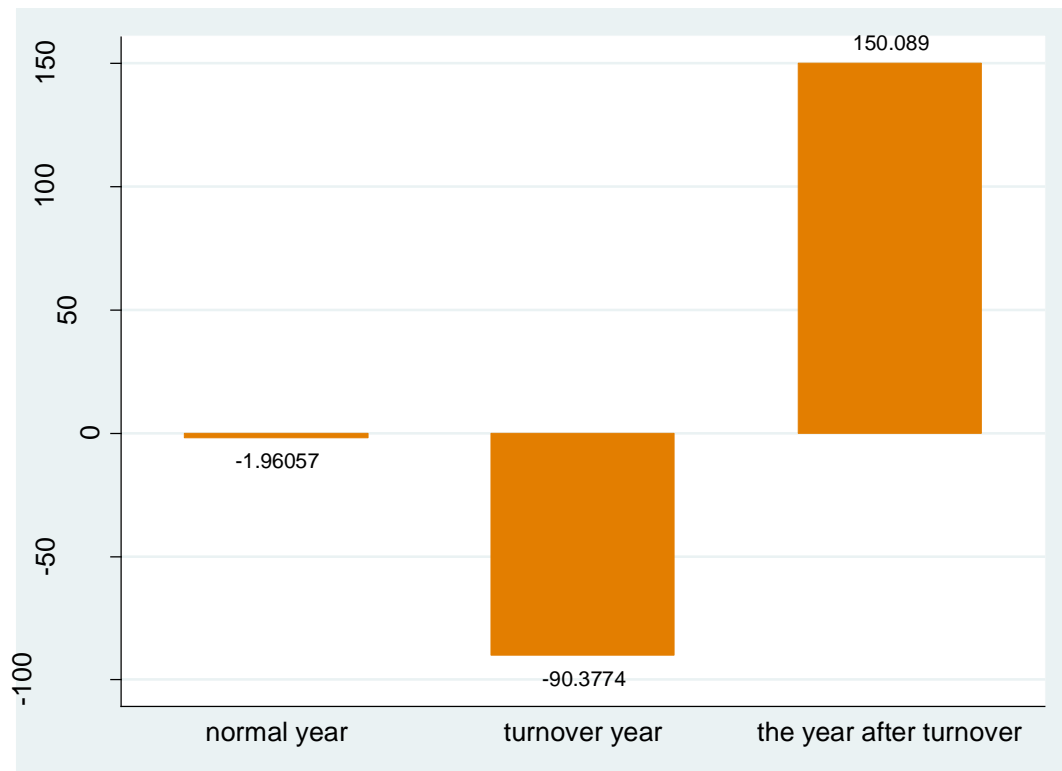
**Figure 1.2** Total filed cases vs. received cases by DICs across provinces, 1994-2013



Data source: Data were collected from each province’s annual provincial yearbooks published between 1994 and 2013.

Notes: We summarized the data from 1994 to 2013 for each province.

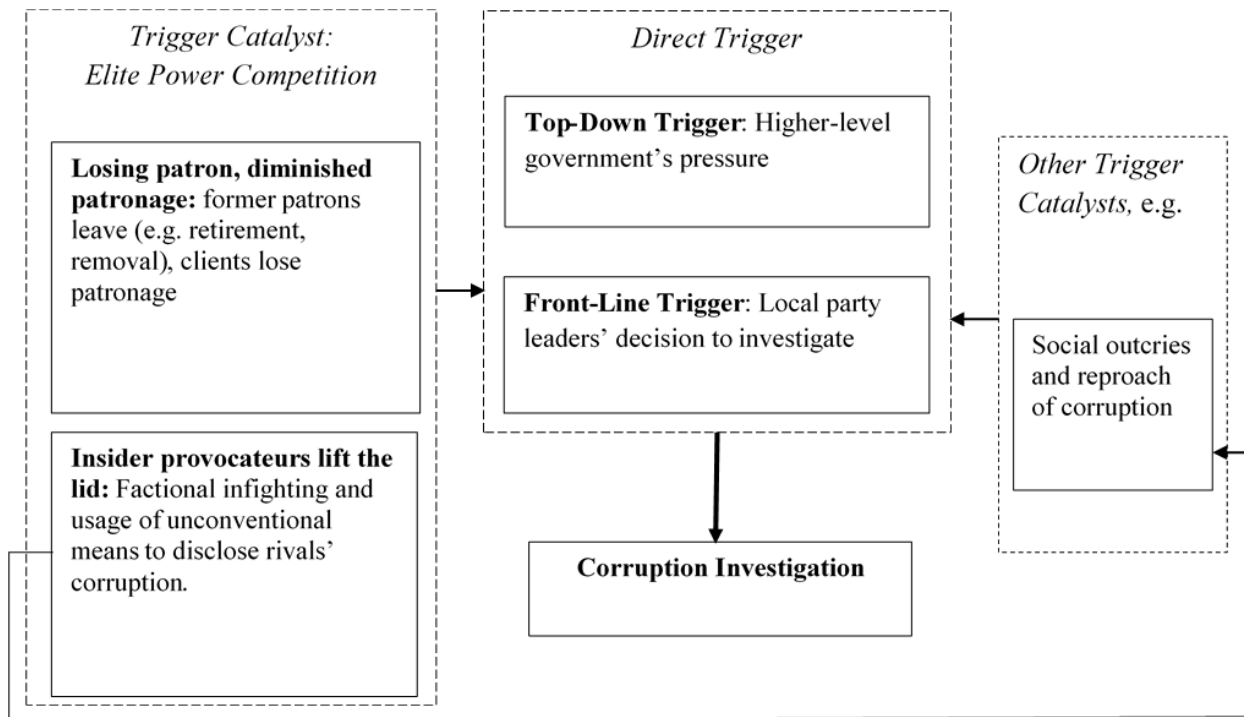
**Figure 2.** Mean of first difference for DIC case investigation



Data Source: Data were collected from each province's annual provincial yearbooks published between 1994 and 2013.

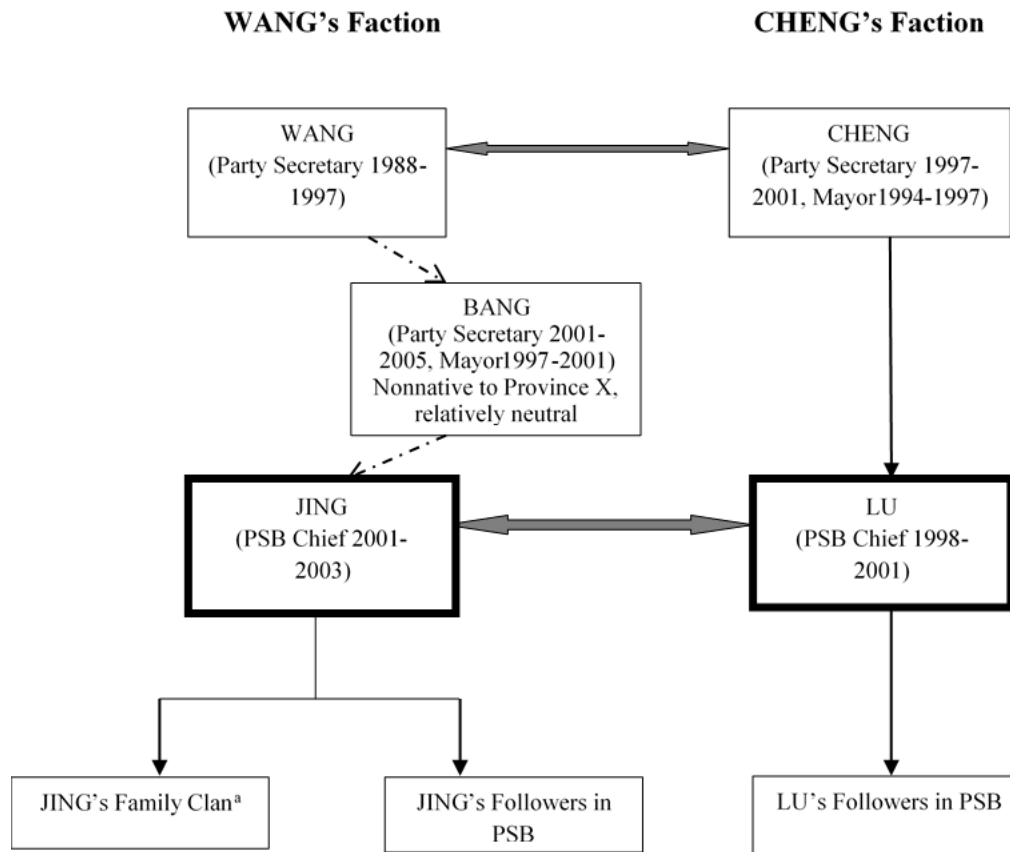
Note: The first difference is calculated by  $Y = Y_{t+1} - Y_t$ , where Y is the number of cases filed for investigation by the DICs in each province, t is a specific year, and t+1 is the year after t. The mean of the first difference is the average of the first difference of all provinces.

**Figure 3.** The “investigation-trigger” framework





**Figure 4.** Power networks in City H



Notes: JING and LU were the two PSB heads of City H. They each belonged to the factions headed by WANG and CHENG, respectively. The bold grey arrows represent strong opposition between two persons. Line arrows indicate patron-client relationship pairs. Dashed arrows indicate weak patron-client relationship pairs.

a. Nine members of JING's family worked in key government positions (i.e. his wife, two daughters, two son-in-laws, three brothers, and one nephew), and five were county-level officials, two were municipal standing committee members.

## NOTES

1. CDIC website, [http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xxgk/gzcx/201308/t20130821\\_45335.html](http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xxgk/gzcx/201308/t20130821_45335.html). See also Guo (2014, 604-605); Li and Deng (2016).
2. According to our interview in City H, a prefecture DIC has approximately 40 staffs.
- 3 Interview with *DIC Officer A*, City H, January 2011.
4. Interview with *DIC official*, Henan, July 2012.
5. See news.qq.com, 2012. “Zhongguoshi qingse fanfu: 90% baoliaoren laizi guanchang neibu” (Sex scandal anticorruption with Chinese Style: 90% of anticorruption using sexual scandals are from government insiders), 5 December, [http://news.qq.com/a/20121205/001207\\_all.htm](http://news.qq.com/a/20121205/001207_all.htm).
6. We refer to the main actors in the cases by fabricated last names to maintain animosity of the interviewees.
7. For the importance of the public security system and its empowerment, see Wang (2014); Wang and Minzner (2015)
8. Interview in July 2009. See also Pye (1981). People sharing hometown ties have more in common, such as dialects, which can reduce their psychological detachment and ensure trust (Wang, 2016).
9. Interview with the retired party secretary in July 2009.

10. WANG's faction was "F Gang" named after his hometown. A party secretary before WANG established "X Gang" among officials from County X.

11. The main conflict between WANG and CHENG was rooted in personnel issues. WANG completely monopolized officials' promotions without consulting Mayor CHENG, which greatly dissatisfied him. Although inherently disliking the factional games, CHENG had to place loyalists into important government positions to combat WANG's dominance.

(Interview with the retired party secretary, July 2009)

12. Appointments and promotions within PSBs are competitive due to their large cadre corps.

The special nature of policing also makes PSBs more autonomous from supervision, except the strong influence from the local party secretaries. See Tanner and Green 2007; Wang 2014.

13. Interview with *PSB officer A*, October 2014.

14. Interviews with DIC staffs who investigated LQ's case, September 2014.

15. Interview of *DIC officer A*, October 2014.

16. Interview of *DIC officer B*, October 2014.

17. Interview of prosecutor in charge of LQ's case, October 2014.

18. Interview in October 2014.

19. Interview of *PSB officer B*, October 2014.

20. Interview of *PSB officer C*, October 2014 and letters reporting JING kept privately by a policeman.
21. Interview of *DIC officer C*, October 2014
22. For Guangdong province, see thepaper.cn. 2015. “Gaungdongsheng gongshang juzhang Zhuzhejun luoma: Beizhi “badao kuli”, cengzao houren jubao” (Guangdong Industrial and Commercial Head Zhu Zejun fell for corruption: charged as a bully and reported by his successor), 18 August, [http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1365315](http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1365315). For Hengyang in Hunan province, see “Three party secretaries consecutively fell for corruption” <http://news.sohu.com/20161108/n472643948.shtml>, for other cities, see “3 consecutive party secretaries falling for corruption occurred in 5 different cities” <http://news.sohu.com/20161207/n475124239.shtml>

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**Appendix A.** Selected Lu bribery cases.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Briber</b>	<b>Reason for bribery</b>
1997	Diamond ring (Y3,600)	Businessman	Unknown
1998	CNY20,000	PSB Subordinate A	Promotion
07/1998	CNY20,000	PSB Subordinate B	Promotion
Mid-Autumn Festival 1999	CNY20,000	PSB Subordinate C	Promotion
Chinese New Year 2000	CNY11,000	Elder brother C	Gratitude for C's promotion
2000	CNY10,000	PSB Subordinate A	Promotion
2000	Watch (CNY9,900)*	PSB Subordinate D	Promotion
10/2000	USD1,000	PSB Subordinate E	Business trip to USA
Chinese New Year 2001	CNY11,000	Elder brother C	Gratitude for C's promotion
02/2001	CNY11,000	PSB Subordinate F	Promotion
04/2001	CNY5,000	PSB Subordinate F	Promotion
04/2001	CNY5,000	PSB Subordinate G	Doctor consultation in Beijing
2001	USD1,000	PSB Subordinate C	Promotion
<b>Total</b>	<b>CNY142500</b>		

Source: Information was collected from court verdict.

Notes: \*The watch was later found to be counterfeit.

**Appendix B.** JING's primary means of personnel manipulation.

<b>Measures</b>	<b>Selected Cases</b>
Bypassing the standard personnel procedures	JING let newly approved candidates assume positions simply by reading their names at a PSB party committee meeting without publicizing them; reshuffled 40 PSB cadres without seeking consent from PSB leaders and related departments; and recruited people without following a competitive process.
Appointing excessive numbers of cadres	JING appointed an additional director and deputy director on top of the allotted quota for the domestic security team of City H.
Selling offices and problematic promotions	JING received CNY50, 000 for promoting an officer, and promoted two officers who were still under DIC investigation.

Source: Interviews with DIC investigators, PSB officers and prosecutors conducted in October 2014, and JING's court verdict.