

Law, Order and Social Control in Xi's China

BEN HILLMAN

In his first term (2012–2017), Xi Jinping's signature domestic policy was an anti-corruption campaign that targeted political enemies and venality in public office. The anti-corruption work has continued in his second term while being superseded in domestic political importance by a campaign to "Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil (2018–2020)." On the surface, the campaign to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil is an anti-crime campaign that focuses on the "black and evil forces" of organized crime and their official protectors, but its scope extends well beyond the ganglands to target a wide range of social and political threats to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Drawing on interviews with government officials, police and citizens as well as analysis of policy documents, this paper argues that the campaign is a populist initiative designed to bolster CCP legitimacy and serve as a mechanism of social control. Like the Chongqing prototype that inspired it, however, the campaign harbors a dark side that could undermine the contemporary Chinese social contract in which people are willing to sacrifice personal freedoms in exchange for security and material benefits.

KEYWORDS: China; law and order; social control; corruption; Chinese Communist Party.

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Authoritarian regimes commonly use campaign-style law enforcement as a means of sustaining their rule. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has a long history of using "strike hard" campaigns to demonstrate that the Party is tough on crime (Bakken, 2005; Trevaskes, 2006), particularly since the 1980s when organized crime made a resurgence (Broadhurst, 2012). Even though the threat of

BEN HILLMAN is an Associate Professor at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University, Canberra. His research interests include Chinese politics and public policy, policies and mechanisms for political inclusion and informal institutions in politics and public policy making. He can be reached at <ben.hillman@anu.edu.au>.

crime has often been exaggerated, periodic campaign-style law enforcement has served populist purposes. Former Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai made himself famous as a popular political figure in large part for his crackdown on organized crime in the city from 2009 to 2012. Although Bo was later purged by the Politburo, his campaign inspired a subsequent nation-wide assault on criminals, dirty cops and their official benefactors—the national campaign to “Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil” (*saohei chue*, 掃黑除惡).

Announced in 2018 by China’s Procurator-General, the campaign became the signature domestic policy of Xi’s second term. It is more ambitious in scope than previous strike hard campaigns and has been treated with the highest priority by all levels of Party and government. The official “Notice on Launching a Special Struggle for Sweeping Away Black and Eliminating Evil” that established the campaign asserts that a “special fight against evil” is needed in order to “thoroughly implement the spirit of the party’s 19th National Congress and the important instructions of General Secretary Xi Jinping to ensure the people’s livelihood and peace, social stability and order, the country’s long-term stability, and further consolidate the party’s ruling foundation” (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).¹ At its heart, Sweep Away Black is a law and order campaign targeting “black societies” (criminal syndicates, *hei shehui*, 黑社會) and the activities typically associated with them such as gambling, prostitution and drug trafficking. However, the campaign has a much wider scope that focuses on the attention of law enforcement on deviant behaviors that have previously eluded Party-state control. Campaign documents call on Party branches to address a wide range of threats to social order, economic competitiveness and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) authority, including monopolies, protection rackets, pressure-selling, the charging of illegal fees, vigilantism, mob incitement and the mobilization of online networks. This includes the spreading of information that could create instability.

Drawing on analysis of policy documents and official reports as well as 31 interviews with government officials, police and citizens, this paper argues that the Sweep Away Black campaign has been influenced by the populist Strike Hard campaign launched by Bo Xilai in Chongqing and seeks to emulate its populist appeal. However, although the campaign has been clearly designed to bolster CCP’s legitimacy by cracking down on perceived injustice, criminality and corruption (Wang,

¹The notice was jointly issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council. See: <http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-01/24/content_5260130.htm>.

2020), it also serves a wider policy goal of social control that encroaches on the private sphere much more extensively than the campaign in Chongqing. Although the Chongqing prototype also harbored a dark side (e.g., by targeting lawyers), Sweep Away Black places in its crosshairs all potential enemies of the Party and Xi Jinping. Findings from this preliminary study suggest that the anti-crime elements of the campaign have been broadly popular and that both the wide sweep of the campaign and its more recent mission creep put it at the risk of undermining the social contract in today's China — i.e., the willingness of people to sacrifice personal freedoms in exchange for security and material benefits.

A Signature Domestic Political Priority

Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil has to date received little scholarly attention, arguably because it was launched at a time of increasing censorship and restrictions on academic freedom within China (Barmé, 2019; Zhao, 2016b) and increasingly limited access to the field for foreign scholars and journalists. Despite the lack of media and academic coverage, it is clear that the campaign is one of the most significant domestic political initiatives of Xi Jinping's second term. The evidence for this can be seen in the campaign's governing arrangements and in the overwhelming ubiquity of its propaganda that began with the 2018 promotion of the Chinese dream and the CCP's core socialist values on the streets of China.

At the top, the campaign is overseen by a high-level “Leading Small Group for the Special Struggle to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil.” Similar to a task force, leading small groups (*lingdao xiaozu*, 領導小組) are key hubs of power at the top of China's Party-state. Typically led by a member of the Politburo, they bring together heads of agencies that are responsible for the achievement of high-level political and public policy goals. Since becoming General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping has used control of the Leading Small Groups to consolidate his power over the Party-state apparatus by personally leading many of the other Leading Small Groups and by establishing new ones under his direct control, such as the National Security Commission that oversees law enforcement and national security. Leading Small Groups may be established under the Party, the State Council or the People's Liberation Army. The most powerful Leading Small Groups are established as permanent commissions (*weiyuanhui*, 委員會). Examples include the Central National Security Commission (*zhongyang quanmian shenhua gaige weiyuanhui*, 中央全面深化改革委員會) and the Central Commission for Comprehensively

Deepening Reform (*zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui*, 中央國家安全委員會), which are both headed by Xi Jinping.

The Leading Small Group for the Special Struggle to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil was established within the Party's powerful Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which is headed by Xi Jinping protégé Guo Shengkun. A member of the Politburo and former Minister of Public Security, Guo is also the Director of the Leading Small Group for the Special Struggle to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil. Other members of the high-powered group are Deputy Director Zhao Kezhi, who is the current Minister of Public Security; Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Zhou Qiang; Chief Prosecutor General Zhang Jun; Deputy Party Secretary Li Shulei of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, who is also known as a top advisor and confidant to Xi Jinping; Deputy Chief of the Party's Organization Bureau Qi Yu; and Secretary General Chen Yixin of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, who is also a former Director of the powerful Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform.

The composition of the Leading Small Group reflects the state agencies that are to coordinate in the implementation of the campaign — namely, the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, the Public Safety Bureau (police) and the Ministry of Justice. All provinces, districts, municipalities, counties and townships in China have established a "Sweep Away Black Office" (*saoheiban*, 掃黑辦) to coordinate between Party and law enforcement organs. The offices are responsible for educating Party and government cadres about the campaign and for ensuring its successful implementation (as measured by the number of successful arrests and prosecutions of miscreants). In several counties in Yunnan visited by me in 2019, there were more Party and government meetings about Sweeping Away Black and Eliminating Evil than any other policy issue. A scan of provincial and sub-provincial government websites suggests that this is pattern has been repeated across the country, highlighting the political priority Xi Jinping has placed on the campaign. To reinforce the political importance of the campaign, its implementation has a "veto" (*yipiao fojue*, 一票否決) in performance evaluations conducted by the Party's Organization Bureau (hence, the Bureau's prominent representation in the Leading Small Group). Veto status means that officials who fail to deliver will not be considered for promotion, regardless of their performance and achievements in other areas. This mechanism is widely used in China to mobilize officials behind key political priorities (Hillman, 2010, 2014b).

The strategies for implementation of the campaign to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil have also been well thought out and articulated by senior Party officials.

According to Party documents, the campaign is to be implemented in three annual phases. In the first phase (2018), law enforcement officials were exhorted to “treat the symptoms” of “black” and “evil.” That is, they were to crack down on criminal organizations and criminal activities and round up as many crooks as possible, including officials and agents of law enforcement who serve as “protective umbrellas” for criminals and criminal organizations. The targeting of “protective umbrellas” is where Sweep Away Black intersects with Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign and can in many ways be seen as an extension of it. In the second phase (2019), law enforcement was tasked with digging through cases that were detected and tackling tougher, more complex cases of black and evil—e.g., criminal syndicates. By successfully prosecuting tough cases, the Party will be able to improve people’s “sense of security” and “satisfaction” with the state. In the third phase (2020), law enforcement is expected to tackle the “root cause” of black and evil by establishing “long-lasting mechanisms” to suppress criminal activity and by “strengthening party organization” at the grassroots. By 2020, Party cadres are exhorted to “achieve an overwhelming victory in the special struggle to combat evil and eliminate evil.”

In recent years, propaganda and thought work have returned as the lifeblood of the CCP (Brady, 2008), especially since Xi Jinping came to power (Zhao, 2016a). Key political and policy priorities can be identified by the degree of attention they are given by the Party’s Propaganda Department and by the ubiquity of related slogans on billboards and street signs. Public propaganda has exploded in recent years on the streets of China, most noticeably in support of major social mobilization campaigns such as Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil. During several visits by me to China in 2018 and 2019, no subject was more widely covered in public propaganda than the campaign to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil. Arrivals to Chinese airports since the beginning of 2018 have been greeted with giant billboards promoting the campaign, and city streets have been adorned with a multitude of signs explaining the targets of the campaign and how to report someone who has committed a black and evil deed. Graphic images on posters have depicted gangsters beating up people and extorting money. Nearly every café and restaurant visited by me in 2019 included a sign on the table explaining the list of offences the campaign was targeting and a police hotline to call to report transgressions.

Rewards were promised to anyone who tipped off the police about a black or evil deed committed. One particular hotel room was adorned with a 20-page glossy brochure that outlined all of the misdeeds that the campaign sought to rectify. These included (i) *Gangland Vice*: gambling, opening casinos, forcing women to work in public entertainment venues such as karaoke bars, dance halls, bathing salons, chess

and card rooms and high-end residential communities; (ii) *Extortion and Protection*: bullying, pressure buying and selling, extortion, charging protection fees and disturbing the normal order of business at markets, wharfs, tourist attractions and other places by such undesirables as “vegetable tyrants” (*caiba*, 菜霸), “city tyrants” (*shiba*, 市霸) and “transport tyrants” (*xingba*, 行霸) who use mafia-tactics to monopolize transport services such as taxis and delivery; (iii) *Loan Sharking and Usury*: “trick loans” (*taolu dai*, 套路貸), “campus loans” (*xiaoyuan dai*, 校園貸), “nude loans” (*luo dai*, 裸貸) and other forms of illegal loans as well as the use of intentional injury, illegal detention, threats and intimidation in debt collection.²

In addition to highlighting the campaign’s policy importance, the extensive propaganda also serves to remind people that the Party is being tough on crime and mobilizing resources in response to public perceptions that the police are derelict or corrupt in discharging their duties. As Wang (2020) has noted, both authoritarian and democratic parties routinely promote themselves as defenders of law and order. Wang (2020, pp. 422–423) further suggests that the emphasis on “law and order” serves to distract from other social ills and policy shortcomings such as an economic slowdown and concomitant social instability. However, I argue that the campaign also establishes a mechanism for the reassertion of Party control at the grassroots, following decades of gradual retreat (Hillman, 2004).

Campaign Origins: The Chongqing Prototype

Although Party documents do not refer to it, the campaign to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil has clear roots in the Strike Black campaign launched in Chongqing in 2009 by the now disgraced former Party leader Bo Xilai. Following his appointment as Chongqing Party Secretary, the ambitious Politburo member Bo Xilai began work on a set of social and economic policies designed to address growing inequalities, making him a star of China’s New Left intellectuals. Bo Xilai is best known, however, for his “cleaning up” of crime and corruption in the city via a ruthless anti-crime campaign that sought to eliminate the city’s gangs and their corrupt official networks.

In 2009, Bo appointed an ally from his previous tenure in Liaoning Province as Chongqing’s new chief of police and began expanding the police force, removing

²The details are reproduced from CCP documents. See, for more details, The State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2018).

corrupt cops and rotating beats to undermine established networks between police and crooks. Within two years, Bo oversaw the arrest of an estimated 5,700 criminals, businesspeople, policemen, judges and government officials (Wang, 2013). The campaign was hugely popular in Chongqing and soon became famous around the country as the city arrested powerful gangsters and law enforcement officials who had once been considered untouchable. The city government seized luxurious cars, properties and businesses from those they arrested, flooding city coffers with funds that could be used to support Bo's social programs that included increased spending on public housing.

Described by insiders as a pilot for an eventual nation-wide campaign,³ Bo's campaign also struck at "red-black" collusions between gangsters and Party-state officials. This included official protection for criminal activities as well as local monopolies such as those that forced construction projects to purchase materials from a single supplier. The campaign's most prominent arrest was the head of the city's Justice Bureau, Wen Qiang, who was convicted and executed for bribery, shielding gangs and for being unable to explain the origins of millions of yuan in assets and cash in his possession. News media also reported on multiple cases in which victims of crime had been denied justice because perpetrators were protected by connections in the police force and courts — a widespread problem and the source of much public anger in China. By combating crime and being seen to dispense justice more equitably, Bo Xilai's Strike Hard campaign was immensely popular with the public. At the same time, the ruthless campaign was also criticized for its disregard of legal procedures and for extracting confessions through torture (Lubman, 2012). Famously, Bo's prosecutors charged a defense attorney representing one of the mafia bosses with falsifying evidence, a move that was widely seen as an attack on the legal profession (Cabestan, 2011). Bo was also criticized for the extent of property confiscations in what was also seen as an attack on private enterprise in favor of more state control of the economy. First espoused by Bo and the New Left, this policy orientation is now favored by the CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping. By promoting "red songs" and cultural performances that celebrated the early revolutionary era, Bo also managed to curry support from the New Left, which consists of democratic socialists and those with nostalgia for the egalitarianism of the Maoist era. It was widely understood that Bo was auditioning for a position on the Politburo Standing Committee and possibly the top job. Instead, he was purged by Xi in one of the most dramatic political scandals in contemporary

³"It is a pilot project in the plans for a nationwide push, adopted at the recent central leadership meeting," said Sidney Rittenberg, who has personally known every Chinese leader since Mao Tse-tung (Moore, 2009).

Chinese history. Xi subsequently adopted many of Bo's popular programs, including "Strike Black," and rolled them out on a nation-wide scale.

Upon its launch in 2018, Xi's Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil followed the "Strike Black" playbook by making sweeping arrests of organized criminals. Like Chongqing's Strike Black, Sweep Away Black also targeted anti-competitive practices such as stand-over tactics, manipulated tendering, illegal land occupation and illegal monopolies in construction, transport, mining, manufacturing, warehousing and logistics, production and operation sites and other industries and fields, including the supply of sand and other building materials. One of the busts in the first round of Bo Xilai's Strike Hard campaign was against a network of organized crime that had taken over and monopolized the sand mining industry in Chongqing Municipality's Baima Town. Xi Jinping's Sweep Away Black specifically targets "sand tyrants" (*shaba*, 沙霸) — a term that has come to refer to any coercive monopolist of building materials.

Other similarities between the campaigns include the targeting of corrupt land deals. Sweep Away Black documentation highlights "evil forces" (*eshili*, 惡勢力) forcibly charging "site fees," "management fees" and "protection fees" in the process of land acquisition, land leases, demolition and construction in the field of real estate development or construction. Other offenses include the recruitment of hoodlums to monopolize the market, disrupting production, seizing work sites and the violent destruction of property. Thugs are often used by developers to intimidate people who do not cooperate with a developer's land requisition and demolition projects. Such activities often involve collusion between businesspeople, gangsters and officials. Bo Xilai's Strike Black arguably garnered most attention in national and global media for striking at these networks in what was called "red-black" collusion. Similarly, a significant element of Xi Jinping's Sweep Away Black campaign has been its emphasis on "protective umbrellas" — that is, members of law enforcement and other state officials who cover up or allow black and evil forces to carry out illegal and criminal activities as well as "relationship networks" (*guanxi wang*, 關係網) that support criminal operations from within the state.

Sweep Away Black: Results and Response

Recognizing Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil as a top Party priority and that their performance would be closely monitored, localities rushed to make arrests following the campaign's launch in early 2018. State news agency Xinhua reported

that by the end of March 2019, the campaign had uncovered 14,226 cases of “black and evil” activity involving 79,018 people (“Saoheiban: Jiezhi 3,” 2019). At the National Meeting to Promote the Special Struggle to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil held in Xi’an, Shaanxi on October 13, 2019, it was announced that 29,571 criminal gangs had been eliminated nationwide (“Quanguo Saohei Chue,” 2019). Media outlets have given extensive coverage to Sweep Away Black cases, especially cases that involved the arrests of “protective umbrellas” (Hillman, 2020). In April 2019, Liaoning Province’s Office for Discipline Inspection announced that it had investigated and responded to more than 1,000 “black and evil” cases, including some involving “big fish” such as Ji Hongsheng, the former Deputy Chief of the Dandong City Public Security Bureau. Ji was sentenced to 10 years for helping criminals avoid prosecution. In court, Ji said “I thought was helping out a friend — no big deal. I didn’t think it was a crime, but now I regret it” (Fan, 2019).

While political campaigns such as Sweep Away Black are able to secure local compliance through performance management (Burns & Zhou, 2010), the campaign offers an additional incentive to cash-strapped local Party bosses in the form of potential property and asset confiscations. Borrowing again from the Chongqing playbook, arrests of gangsters and their umbrellas have been accompanied by large fines as well as confiscations of cash, cars, businesses and property, the proceeds of which flow into the local government coffers. In an example of such confiscations, the People’s Intermediate Court of Xiangyang City in Northwestern Hubei Province convicted 12 gangsters guilty of offenses under Sweep Away Black that included usury, kidnapping, extortion and intimidation. The Court noted that it had carefully screened property and assets and confiscated “black monies” from the gang’s ringleader to the value of 48 million yuan (US\$6.7 million). All other convicted associates were given jail terms and fines starting from 460,000 yuan (US\$64,000). This was just one of 37 gangland cases sent for prosecution by the Sweep Away Black operations in Xiangyang City in early 2019 (Hubei Provincial People’s Government Official Web Portal, 2019). In August 2019, Heilongjiang Province reported the smashing of 46 gangs and accompanying asset seizures totaling 2.17 billion yuan (US\$300 million) which was 7.8 times the average monthly value of seizures in the period before the “special struggle” began (“Gaoqing Dudao “Lijian”,” 2019).

As with many other high-level national campaigns, Sweep Away Black spurred competition among provinces and localities. In Yunnan Province where interviews were conducted for this project, authorities boasted that they had smashed more than 5,000 criminal gangs. One high-profile case involved the convicted rapist Sun Xiaoguo, also known in the media as the “Kunming Bully.” Despite being handed a death

sentence in 1998, Sun was discovered in April 2019 to be living freely in Kunming and holding shares in multiple entertainment venues. He was also believed to be the head of a criminal gang. Subsequent investigations into the handling of Sun's commuted prison sentences charged his parents and 17 others in connection with his evasion of justice. His mother, Sun Heyu, was sentenced to 20 years, and his stepfather, Li Qiazhong, received 19 years for bending the law for personal gain and accepting and offering bribes. Others sentenced for helping Sun to secure leniency include former inspector of the provincial Justice Department Luo Zhengyun, and former judge of the Yunnan People's Higher Court Liang Zi'an ("19 Sentenced For Ties," 2019). Like the case of Ji Hongsheng in Liaoning Province, Sun's case received much attention because it addressed a popular source of frustration in Chinese society — the unequal treatment that people receive in their encounters with law enforcement.

Highlighting an emphasis on winning hearts and minds, the campaign has targeted other crimes that stir public indignation. Notable among them is loan sharking. As China's economy has cooled in recent years and credit restrictions have tightened, many ordinary citizens have fallen victim to loan sharking (Hillman, 2020). In February 2018, China's Ministry of Public security announced that it had arrested 16,249 suspects and confiscated 3.53 billion yuan (US\$527 million) in connection with loan scams in the first year of the Sweep Away Black campaign (Ren, 2019). Loan sharking is common across China and is practiced in a variety of predatory forms. Loan sharks charge high interest for fast cash, and loan terms are typically short. Chinese law prohibits interest rates above 24% per annum on any form of credit, but loan sharks will sometimes charge this amount and more per month. Borrowers find themselves in serious trouble if they fail to repay the loans on time. One loan shark offering is the "nude loan." Nude loans require borrowers (who are typically young and female) to provide the loan shark with nude photos of themselves that the loan shark will post on the Internet in the event of a default. Law enforcement in China calls such offences "soft violence" (*ruan baoli*, 軟暴力). Debtors can experience hard violence, too. According to a local policeman in Yunnan Province, "Gangs will do anything to terrorize people who owe them money [including] flushing people's heads in the toilet and making them eat shit. Sometimes loan sharks imprison people in a room until they come up with a plan for repayment" (personal communication, March 2019). Illegal imprisonment is apparently so common that it has been specifically identified as one of the "black and evil" acts to be eradicated.

In a Yunnan village visited by me in March 2019, locals confirmed the policeman's report and offered many examples of people who had met such fates. The police crackdown on loan sharking was found to be extremely popular among ordinary

citizens in several villages. Many also reported satisfaction with the arrests of village tyrants who were often behind coercive monopolies in the construction industry. In one village, the village head and 21 of his associates had been arrested in connection with offences related to uncompetitive practices. “The gangs are quiet now,” a former township head mentioned. “They know this [crackdown] is serious” (personal communication, March 2019).

As Wang (2020) has noted, by targeting unpopular gang activities, the campaign has helped to bolster the legitimacy of the police and, by extension, the Party. Those interviewed also expressed satisfaction with Sweep Away Black’s crackdown on scams and rip-offs. In many parts of Yunnan Province, the local economy is highly dependent on tourism (Hillman, 2003, 2010). However, the province has attracted a bad name for tourism-related scams, and many in the industry perceive the widespread nature of such scams to be detrimental to the long-term health of the regional economy (Hillman, 2018). Yunnan had become notorious for cut-price holiday packages, which unscrupulous operators often sold below their actual cost to unsuspecting tourists, in the expectation that profits would be recouped from commissions delivered by shopping centers selling souvenirs and local produce set up along highways for the specific purpose of syphoning cash from tour groups. Unsuspecting tourists were routinely ripped off at these venues (Hillman, 2019b). During interviews in 2018 and 2019, local industry insiders confirmed that roadside shopping centers have been closed and that this practice has now stopped. Many locals interviewed expressed their satisfaction that authorities were cracking down on such illegal activities because it was giving their region a bad name and overall tourist numbers were believed to be in decline because of Yunnan’s reputation for such scams. According to one local entrepreneur, “The crackdown might hurt the economy in the short-term, but I think it will be good for us in the long term. The Party is doing the right thing.”

However, the public reaction to Sweep Away Black has not always been favorable. During a second visit to several communities in China at the end of 2019, there was an observable shift in public attitudes from earlier in the year. Although citizens remained satisfied with the crackdown on loan sharks, many reported that the crackdown on gambling, a popular pastime in rural areas, had gone too far. As one man reported, “Both of my sons were swept away (arrested) for gambling and spent one month in the town lockup. But they were just playing for fun. The police should focus on the gangsters and not the gamblers” (personal communication, December 2019). In many places, the police were handing out short-term extra-judicial sentences to anyone caught participating in illegal activities as part of the Sweep Away Black crackdown. In another village in the same county, more than 30 men had been arrested

for using illicit drugs. A policeman explained that they were under pressure to meet quotas and needed to arrest as many people as possible. In a once-sleepy township visited frequently over several years — a place where police and township officials often enjoyed long siestas, police were working extra hours to meet the demands of Sweep Away Black. One woman whose brother was a police officer said he often did not return home from work until after 11 pm each evening. In one prefectural city, it was discovered that an additional “black” prison had been constructed on the edge of town to accommodate all those swept up in the campaign, including many who were being detained for days and weeks as extra-judicial punishment for their connection to illegal activities. The extra judicial element also has parallels in Chongqing, where Bo Xilai’s Strike Black force was accused of relying on forced confessions — although this is a common *modus operandi* of China’s Public Security Bureau — and for abusing those who questioned the campaign’s legality. The most prominent case was that of Li Zhuang, a lawyer who had defended a high-profile gangster and was charged with falsifying evidence in another case. This move was considered by many to be an attack on China’s legal profession (Cabestan, 2011). In a similar vein, Wang (2020, p. 422) argues that Xi Jinping’s Sweep Away Black campaign “distorts the criminal justice system by demanding that criminal justice organs deliver severe and swift justice.”

Wang (2020) also sounds the alarm about Sweep Away Black’s seizure of property, which was a hallmark of Bo Xilai’s crackdown in Chongqing. Bo was well known for his preference for a stronger state role in the economy, and many perceived his actions as being anti-private enterprise. Once the richest man in Chongqing, Li Jun went on the run when 700 million yuan (US\$100 million) of his assets were seized by the Public Security Bureau. From his place of hiding, the fugitive businessman described Strike Black as a violent struggle over property and power in Chongqing (Higgins, 2012). Sweep Away Black was launched at a time when entrepreneurs in China were nervous about Xi Jinping’s preferential treatment of State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) at the expense of private enterprise. Under Xi, SOEs were winning more and more government contracts and accessing finance more easily than their private counterparts. The trend acquired its own epithet in 2018—“the state advances as the private [sector] retreats” (Hillman, 2019b). As in Chongqing in the late 2000s, businesspeople have become nervous that officials—sometimes with the encouragement of business rivals—will use Sweep Away Black to destroy their operations and seize their assets. “The problem,” as one businessperson in Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan, explained, “is that anyone who’s done business of any size in China has had interactions with officials and regulations that aren’t always clear cut from a legal point of view. Everyone is vulnerable” (personal communication, December 2019).

Several businesspeople and officials interviewed expressed concern that it was unclear who might be targeted and when. Indeed, the political power of the terms “black” and “evil” lie in their ambiguity. Although campaign documents outline specific black and evil deeds, they also specify categories of offenders which are often vaguely defined, enabling Party officials or local law enforcement to apply the “black” label to anyone perceived to be deviant. The label “black” has a long history in Chinese political and legal discourse that goes well beyond the sense of “gangster” or “miscreant.” In CCP rhetoric and propaganda, the terms “black and evil forces” and “black hand” are often used as shorthand for dissidents and CCP enemies. Prominent dissident Liu Xiaobo, for example, was frequently referred to as a “black hand” (Buckley, 2017). State media described the Hong Kong protests of 2019 as being orchestrated by “black hands” with support from “foreign black hands” (Hillman, 2019a). Protests in China’s Tibetan and Uyghur areas a decade ago were similarly characterized.⁴ Unsurprisingly, the Party has used the campaign to bring certain elements of society within its direct control. These include online bloggers, activists and protestors. The campaign targets such categories of people as “vigilantes and self-appointed mediators” who act as “underground law enforcement, 地下執法隊” in the streets, railway stations, urban villages, urban-rural integration areas and on public transport such as buses and subways; villagers who make trouble, organize and plan group petitions by blocking buildings or roads or mobilize the public to disturb the public order or traffic and endanger public security; and “evil forces” that organize or recruit “water armies” (*shuijun*, 水軍) on the Internet to threaten, intimidate, insult, defame and harass others as well as “evil forces across borders” (*kua guojing de heishili*, 跨國境的黑惡勢力) — a warning to those exchanging information with parties outside of China (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

Although Internet-related cases tend to focus on cyberattacks and especially the extortion of enterprises and individuals through the posting of malicious articles and reports online (“Jingzhun Daji Wangluo,” 2019), surveillance covers the spreading of online rumors, which can include any information the authorities find inconvenient. The most prominent case of charges being laid for the spreading of inconvenient rumors was Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who in December 2019 was one of the first to warn about the outbreak of SARS-like viral pneumonia, subsequently identified as the coronavirus COVID-19. After posting his concerns to a WeChat group of

⁴On the mainland Chinese media’s portrayal of the Hong Kong protests, see Hillman (2019a). On Chinese Communist Party’s characterizations of the Tibetan protests of 2008–2009 and Uyghur protests of 2009, see Hillman and Tuttle (2016). On the Party’s dark formulas for dehumanizing enemies, see also Barmé (2019).

medical friends and colleagues, he was one of the eight people detained by police and forced to write a confession that he had fabricated and spread rumors. Li Wenliang contracted the virus and died, and his death triggered an outpouring of public discontent about Party censorship and control of information (Green, 2020).

Total Social Control

The Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil campaign's social control objectives are what set it apart from the Chongqing prototype. Increasingly since 2019, campaign documents have exhorted law enforcement to focus on social disorder (*luan*, 亂) in addition to black and evil forces, signaling that Sweep Away Black is no ordinary anti-crime campaign. The expanded mandate is reflected in campaign propaganda across the country. A common slogan found on billboards and banners in 2019 reads “where there is black, sweep it, where there is no black, eliminate evil, and where there is no evil, cure disorder.” Security forces are on notice, and there is always someone to catch. Party documents and propaganda suggest that the inclusion of “disorder” is a natural extension of the campaign and reflects an emphasis on the rule of law and China's new social governance systems (Shan, 2018). Nanjing City, for example, announced in 2019 that it was strengthening its grid-based social governance system to ensure that “evil forces” including village, city and transport “tyrants” had nowhere to hide (“Nanjing Saohei Chue,” 2019).

With Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil campaign committees established and empowered at all levels of administration, security agencies mobilized and undesirable types filling police detention centers, the campaign is proving especially useful for the Party as it continues to tighten political control. The persistence of “evil forces” provides justification for the expansion of authoritarian social control systems such as surveillance and social credit schemes. The campaign also coincides with a stricter application of political checks (*zhengshen*, 政審) for college applicants and job seekers. One's political record has mattered more for life chances in the Xi Jinping era than at any time since the marketization and liberalization of the economy in the 1980s. People have expressed fears that an association with or family ties to someone swept up in the campaign could land them in trouble. Villagers reported that a young woman was expelled from a corporate recruitment program when it was found that her father had been “swept up” (*saohei*, 掃黑) in the campaign. After hearing the story, a local businesswoman heard commented, “Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil is the Party's latest initiative to make us more obedient (*tinghua*, 聽話)” (personal communication, December 2019).

Campaign documents now routinely refer to “comprehensive governance,” a term the CCP uses to describe its strategic approach to the maintenance of social order. According to Party documents, the comprehensive governance approach involves the integrated deployment of legal, political, economic, administrative, educational, cultural and other means to punish crimes, reform criminals, educate and save offenders, prevent crimes, maintain social order, safeguard people’s happiness and ensure the smooth progress of socialist modernization under the unified leadership of Party committees and governments at all levels with support from other political and legal organs (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2001). Sweep Away Black’s contribution to comprehensive governance is highlighted by official language formulations issued by the Party’s propaganda bureau that Party and government officials use to guide internal discussion and local propaganda. Local governments across the country produced handbooks listing 30 standard language formulations (*biaozhun yongyu*, 標準用語) for discussing and promoting Sweep Away Black. They describe the campaign’s primary purposes as “maintaining long-term social order” (*weihu shehui changzhi jiuan*, 維護社會長治久安), creating a safe and stable social environment (*chuangzao anquan wending shehui huanjing*, 創造安全穩定社會環境), guarantee peace and order for the people and long-term stability for the nation (*baozhang renmin anju leye shehui anding youxu, guojia changzhi jiuan*, 保障人民安居樂業社會安定有序, 國家長治久安) and enhancing people’s sense of well-being and security (*zengqiang renmin qunzhong huodegan xingfugan anquangan*, 增強人民群眾獲得感幸福感安全感).⁵

Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil is increasingly being used by local authorities as a tool of social management. Regular updates about the campaign, its targets and recommended methods are issued by all branches of government. In addition to rounding up gangsters and their protective umbrellas, localities can choose which negative influences in society they wish to prioritize so long as they remain faithful to the overall objectives of the campaign. Local authorities sometimes overreach. In March 2019, the government of Xiangtan City in Hunan Province announced that “members of families that have lost an only child” (*shidu jiating renyuan*, 失獨家庭人員) and serious cases of mental illness would be “priority targets” for Sweeping Away Black and Eliminating Evil. In Jinan, Shandong Province, the Public Security Bureau announced that 29 behaviors including “wearing big gold chains, sporting tattoos or displaying rude and unreasonable attitudes” were considered

⁵See, for example, the guidance provided by Yangquan City in Shanxi Province; retrieved from: <http://www.yqcq.gov.cn/zhuanti/saohai/zsd/201809/t20180917_773070.html>.

“expressions of black and evil forces” (Andelie, 2019). According to new implementation guidelines, Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil now also targets religious organizations and activities with a focus on unauthorized gatherings and unofficial religious schools. This development poses additional risks for ethnic and religious minorities whose “deviant” behavior can be easily labeled as “black and evil,” thereby subjecting people to additional repression and abuse by security forces (Hillman, 2014a).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that local Party branches are using the campaign to squash dissent. In one case in Yunnan, villagers who complained about an exploitative land deal were detained under the auspices of Sweep Away Black after assembling in a large group to protest. In another village, 23 people were arrested in a single police swoop. One of the campaign’s explicit targets has been “thuggery in grassroots politics,” including the activities of “clan forces” (*zongzu shili*, 宗族势力) (personal communication, December 2019). This has empowered local authorities to clamp down on village organization and representation. As one village elder said, “Previously, when we had a problem with the government, we could often resolve it by going in a large group to the township or county government and wait until the leaders heard our complaint. Nowadays people do not get together like this because they are afraid they will be targeted by the Sweep Away Black Office” (Interview with a Yunnan village elder, December 2019). During a later visit to Yunnan in 2019, villagers who had previously celebrated the campaign’s takedown of gangland activities expressed concern at its mission creep. As one villager explained, “We worry because someone only needs to report you to the committee for you to be investigated. People have started making false reports against their enemies. It’s like the Cultural Revolution” (Interview with a Yunnan farmer, December 2019).

Conclusion

The campaign to Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil is arguably the highest priority domestic policy initiative of Xi Jinping’s second term. This nation-wide campaign builds on the earlier work of the anti-corruption campaign and draws heavily on the Chongqing prototype of crime busting that was spearheaded by the now disgraced former Party leader Bo Xilai. The campaign has copied much from the Chongqing playbook, including the successful targeting of organized crime and organized gangs and the dismantling of various vice enterprises. The campaign also complements Xi’s ongoing anti-corruption project by targeting the “protective umbrellas” of organized crime. Sweep Away Black also involves the seizure of large

amounts of property from convicted felons, which, like in Chongqing a decade ago, have helped to fill local government coffers across the country.

Interviews conducted as part of this study suggest that the crackdown on organized crime and protective umbrellas has been broadly popular, especially in its first phase. By tackling ire-inducing injustices, the campaign may have achieved its goal to strengthen Party legitimacy. At the same time, the campaign's inclusion of a long list of "black and evil" categories is beginning to raise concerns about the Party's targets. Just as in Chongqing a decade ago, private entrepreneurs are becoming concerned that in an increasingly pro-SOE political environment, the murky nature of business-government relations will lead to the unfair targeting of entrepreneurs in the name of Sweeping Away Black and Eliminating Evil. The extra-judicial nature of detentions and punishments and the wide sweep of the campaign are also beginning to raise concerns about justice and due process, just as they did in Chongqing a decade ago.

Sweep Away Black and Eliminate Evil is much more than an anti-crime campaign. It is emerging as a powerful apparatus for social management and control by extending the Chongqing anti-crime model to attack a wider number of social ills and threats to Party authority. The very use of the politically loaded terms "black" and "evil" intentionally creates a semantic scope for local Party committees and Party bosses to target enemies and nuisances as well as ordinary citizens who might embarrass authorities through in person or online protests about government policies and actions. At least in part, it has become a scare campaign. The danger of having either oneself or a member of one's family labeled as "black" has begun to instill a sense of fear among ordinary citizens in the same way that the anti-corruption campaign has instilled a sense of fear in Party and government officials. The campaign fits a pattern of rule-by-fear that is characteristic of the current administration.

The campaign risks over-reaching into people's private lives, affecting freedoms such as the right to protest against government policy and in some cases, creating insecurity about property. This dark side to the campaign against black and evil poses risks to the social contract in China today—the implicit contract by which people accept authoritarian control and the CCP's political monopoly on power in return for security and economic benefits. The fragility of this contract has been exposed by public reactions to the government's handling of the 2019–2020 coronavirus pandemic, with many citizens openly acknowledging the perverse side effects of the CCP's efforts to achieve total social control. Whether or not the public backlash against the government's mishandling and cover-ups regarding COVID-19 will lead to any moderation in the implementation of Sweep Away Black remains to be seen. It might be difficult for Party leaders to resist continued use of the social control

apparatus that the campaign has established to run from the central leading group right down to the grassroots. Further research into these questions is urgently needed, as the answers will provide important insights into the type of polity and society China is becoming under the term-limitless Xi Jinping administration and the strength of the social contract between Chinese citizens and the authoritarian one-party state.

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