

Research Report for India China Institute

*The Supervisory System in China's Governance, from the Qing to Contemporary
China*

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I. Introduction

In a nation with a highly centralized government, the distance between the central government and the area under its rule is always the origin of many problems. The central government worries that the local municipality cannot adequately fulfill its instructions and will report lies instead of facts. These concerns, which have occurred since the imperial era, continue to affect the governance of contemporary China. How does China's central government balance and maintain its control over local government? My research focused on the various solutions proffered for this problem from the Qing dynasty to contemporary China. I found a special political institution played such a role between the central rulers and local officials, which is called the Supervisory System (督察制度).

The origin of the Supervisory System in Chinese politics can be traced to the Qin Dynasty when Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) unified China and established a centralized political system to rule China. Qin's central government was formed by three chief officials and nine ministers, which were called San Gong Jiu Qing (三公九卿). The three chief officials, who were at the top of its bureaucratic hierarchy, were named Cheng Xiang (丞相, the Chief Minister), Tai Wei (太尉, Chief Military General), and Yu Shi Da Fu (御史大夫, Chief Supervisory Official). So, Yu Shi Da Fu, as one of the three top officials in the central government, was the symbol of the earliest national Supervisory System.

In Chinese history, the Supervisory System had different names and evolved with advanced functions and responsibilities. However, the core function of the Supervisory System largely remained the same as the major channel between the central government and many local governments. In my study, I chose the final version of the Supervisory System from imperial China, the Qing dynasty's supervisory system, and I also selected to study the latest version of the Supervisory System from contemporary China, the Supervisory System under Xi Jinping's government. They represent the solutions from different eras of the Chinese state to the same problem: how does the central government manage China's huge bureaucracy?

In the subsequent sections, I will explain the Supervisory Systems in the Qing dynasty and Xi's government by illustrating the executive structure and study of cases. My research mainly relies on primary source material. For contemporary China, I studied public material from the government and news from governmental channels with public access. For the Qing dynasty, I searched and analyzed archives at the First Historical Archives of China, which also provides public access to historical documents. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the India China Institute at The New School. Their generous support was instrumental in facilitating my research journey to China, allowing me to conduct an in-depth exploration of the archives at the First Historical Archives of China.

II. Supervisory System under Xi Jinping's Government

In March 2018, China's National People's Congress (NPC, 全国人民代表大会) lifted the presidential term limits and concurrently established the National Supervisory Commission (NSC, 国家监察委员会), positioning it constitutionally at the same level as the Supreme People's Court (最高人民法院) and The Supreme People's Procuratorate (最高人民检察院).

The NSC, an expanded iteration of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI, 中央纪律检查委员会), took on the role of overseeing all government officials, not just Communist Party members. This expansion of power, affirmed by constitutional amendments and the new Supervision Law, authorized the CCDI-NSC and its local versions, the CDI and SC, to perform searches and detentions bypassing ordinary legal procedures.

A significant policy update came in June 2022 when the CCP endorsed the Regulation for Dispatched Supervisory Organization (《纪检监察机关派驻机构工作规则》 the Regulation), effectively detaching supervisory officials from the agencies they monitor. This meant that appointments, removals, and salaries of supervisory officials were now managed by higher-level CDI-SC authorities, not by the supervised entities. For instance, a police bureau's supervisory official, previously reporting to the bureau director, is now answerable only to the city's CDI-SC and tasked with monitoring the director too.

These changes have created an autonomous supervisory system that operates independently from the entities it supervises, with a widened scope that includes enforcing loyalty to the CCP and its leadership, as explicitly stated in the Regulation.

In summary, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has significantly reformed its supervisory system. The National People's Congress, in a move to centralize power, established the National Supervisory Commission (NSC), positioning it on par with top judicial bodies in the constitution. This body expanded the reach of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) to oversee all government officials, not just Communist Party members. Local supervisory branches have also been empowered with extensive authority, such as conducting property searches and detentions without following standard legal procedures. In 2022, regulations were introduced to ensure supervisory officials are appointed by and report to

higher-level supervisory commissions, not the entities they audit. This has created an independent supervisory network across the nation, tasked with broadened objectives including the enforcement of loyalty to the CCP and its leadership.

III. Supervisory System in Qing Dynasty

The supervisory system of the Qing dynasty can be conceptualized as a two-tiered structure comprising local and central levels. At the local level, the province governor, known as the Zong Du(总督), was the paramount official overseeing comprehensive provincial affairs, including military and judicial matters. Integral to the supervisory hierarchy, the Zong Du had the title as Vice National Supervisory Official on the Right.

Subordinate to the Zong Du was the Xun Fu (巡抚), or General-Inspector, who functioned as the governor's deputy. The Xun Fu's duties involved traversing the province to audit local administrations. Assisting the Xun Fu were Dao Yuan (道员), or Inspectors, who either monitored specific locales or traversed various sites to gather information for the Xun Fu.

The local supervisory system primarily served as the regime's extended sensory apparatus, focused on collecting information rather than its analysis or processing. In contrast, at the central level, the Du Cha Yuan (都察院), or Supervisory Court, was the linchpin of the national supervisory framework, acting as the central information nexus. This court appointed fifteen supervisory correspondents to facilitate communication between the Du Cha Yuan and local supervisory officials such as the Zong Du and Xun Fu.

The apex of the Du Cha Yuan was the Zuo Du Yu Shi (左都御史), or National Supervisory Official on the Left, who oversaw the entire network. This title contrasts with the Vice National Supervisory Official on the Right (右都御史), associated with the Zong Du, indicating a local role. Collectively, the Dao Yuan, Xun Fu, Zong Du, and Zuo Du Yu Shi

orchestrated the national supervisory system, forming a cohesive chain of oversight extending from the local to the national echelon.

During my research at the First Historical Archives of China, I uncovered various cases that shed light on the Qing dynasty's Supervisory System. A notable instance involved a supervisory correspondent from Zhejiang Province named Du Guo (浙江监察御史, 杜果), documented on June 17th in the 9th year of the Shun Zhi Emperor's reign.¹ Du Guo submitted a detailed report to the Du Cha Yuan, the central supervisory authority, concerning local officials who exploited their roles to oppress peasants and misappropriate funds designated for shipbuilding. The report was a formal complaint intended for the Du Cha Yuan, which, in turn, issued a response affirming Du Guo's call to dismiss the corrupt officials. This exchange underscores the system's intended function of accountability and the oversight mechanism in place during that period.

While researching at the First Historical Archives of China, I found a fascinating case from the Yong Zheng era of the Qing dynasty. This involved two influential generals from the Yong Zheng reign, Long Keduo and Nian Gengyao, known for exploiting their power to engage in corruption, including selling official positions for personal gain. The documentation of their misconduct was captured in a report dated May 15th, during the third year of Emperor Yong Zheng's rule, penned by Vice National Supervisory Official on the Left, Wu Longyuan (吴隆元).²

¹ 浙江监察御史, 杜果, Title: 为文武皆当贪横朋比虐民大误军机事, 顺治九年六月十七日. Archive Number: 02-01-02-1748-001,002-1479,

² 都察院左佥都御史, 吴隆元, Title: 奏为特参隆科多年羹尧二臣欺君负国请从重治罪事, 雍正三年五月十五日. Archive Number: 04-01-30-0018-036

The report meticulously detailed the corrupt actions of Long Keduo and Nian Gengyao. What is particularly striking about this case is Emperor Yong Zheng's response.³ Instead of addressing Wu Longyuan's report directly, he responded to another report by Zhu Shi (朱轼), the minister of government affairs (吏部尚书), which also voiced outrage over the generals' corruption and was endorsed by other officials. Yong Zheng's reaction was uncharacteristically humble for an emperor; he acknowledged his oversight and urged his officials to either correct their own misconduct or learn from the incident. He said: "My fault, I know. I have already corrected it. . . . From now on, if anyone has similar faults, please correct as well, if no fault, please take this as a lesson." His willingness to admit fault publicly to his ministers was an unexpected gesture that deviated from the typical imperial conduct.

IV. Conclusion

Tracing the evolution of China's Supervisory System from the Qing dynasty to the modern era under Xi Jinping's leadership reveals a consistent theme: the central government's persistent effort to exert control over its vast bureaucracy. The historical precedents set by the Qing dynasty's intricate supervisory hierarchy have found their contemporary parallel in the structures established by the NPC in 2018 and refined in 2022, which aim to address the perennial challenges of local governance.

The transformation of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection into the National Supervisory Commission reflects a strategic adaptation to modern governance needs, preserving the spirit of the traditional Supervisory System while expanding its

³ 吏部尚书, 朱轼, Title: 奏为隆科多年夤尧结党招权作威纳贿诸臣无不愤恨捧读上谕交相勉励事, 雍正三年五月二十四日. Archive Number: 04-01-30-0018-031

mandate to meet the complexities of today's political landscape. The enhanced powers of search, detention, and independent operation signify a major shift towards a more centralized and controlled approach to supervision, with an explicit focus on loyalty and integrity within the government.

My research, supported by the invaluable archives of the First Historical Archives of China and the patronage of the India China Institute at The New School, underscores the enduring relevance of the Supervisory System as a vital organ of Chinese governance. It is a testament to how historical structures continue to inform contemporary policies, serving as both a bridge to the past and a foundation for the future. The Supervisory System, with its roots in ancient Chinese philosophy and administration, persists as a pivotal mechanism in the Chinese political paradigm, echoing the timeless axiom that to govern is to supervise.