

Understanding Bureaucratic Involution through Weber's Bureaucracy: China's Central Inspection Teams in Practice

Modern China
2022, Vol. 48(6) 1179–1207
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00977004221118573
journals.sagepub.com/home/mcx



Zhengyang Jiang¹

Abstract

Max Weber came to see his “rational bureaucracy” as also something of an “iron cage.” The reliance on regularized paperwork can result in a separation of the administrative procedure from actual substance, and the level-by-level transmission of documents can result in the resolution of problems on paper only. The complex specialized and standardized procedures of the formal, hierarchical bureaucracy are therefore often ineffective because they have lost touch with reality. In China, the problem of the “involution” of public power found by central inspection teams 中央巡视组 during the course of their inspections is in essence the “formalist” 形式主义 response of bureaucracy when supervised and reviewed. Weber believed that the iron cage of bureaucracy, or the irrationality of rationality, needs an outside “charismatic” authority to check and counterbalance it. The practice of the central inspection teams, however, shows how bureaucratic organizations only further intensify formalism to preserve themselves in the face of such outside authority. That is to say, if the charismatic authority does not break

¹Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

Corresponding Author:

Zhengyang Jiang, Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences, No. 11 (Southwestern Community), Apartment 10, Tsinghua University, Haidian District, Beijing 100874, China.
Email: zyjiangruc@163.com

through the trap of bureaucratized patterns of thought and behavior, the iron cage will only be further strengthened and perpetuated.

Keywords

bureaucratic involution, Max Weber, bureaucracy, central inspection teams

In his article “Agricultural Involution and Bureaucratic Involution: Types, Concepts, Empirical Generalizations, and Operative Mechanisms,” Philip C. C. Huang proposes the concept of “bureaucratic involution.” Bureaucrats are responsible to their superiors through paperwork and reports, and this formalistic operation tends to make routine work standardized and specialized, yet also ineffective and out of touch with reality. Moreover, when such powers penetrate deeply into local society, the bureaucracy imposes its operational mode and involutory mechanism on villages, making rural governance more and more formal and bureaucratic. This involution is not limited to China’s current bureaucracy or modern bureaucracy in general as theorized by Max Weber, but is the inevitable disadvantage of all forms of bureaucracy (Huang, 2021a).

“Central inspection teams” 中央巡视组—the joint product of the office of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee, and as of 2009 under the auspices of the Central Leading Group for Inspection Work 中央巡视工作领导小组—mainly inspect violations of law and party discipline by leaders at the provincial or ministerial level. Past studies on the teams have appeared primarily in the *China Inspection and Supervision Newspaper* 中国纪检监察报 and the *China Inspection and Supervision Journal* 中国纪检监察杂志. Academic articles have discussed the teams from the perspectives of their historical development, the rule of law, the supervision system, and their political function. The research focus has gradually changed from studies of regulations (Tang, 2021; Wang, 2018; Zhao, 2017) and historical overviews (Jiang, 2021; Hu, 2019) to more in-depth theoretical explorations (Guo and Zhong, 2021; Shan, 2021). In terms of empirical studies, some authors provide a broad perspective through analyses and summaries of long-term trends and data (Li and Wu, 2019), while others provide detailed analyses of inspection feedback and rectification documents 整改文件 in a given year (Cheng, 2017) or analyze the effectiveness of anticorruption inspection teams through the investigation and processing of corruption cases (Xing, 2017). Also, a Chinese anticorruption index (the Corruption Perception Index or CPI) has been compiled to

measure the role of inspection teams in China's anticorruption efforts by tracking changes in the numbers of officials disciplined for corruption (Liu and Cai, 2020).

This article analyzes the problem of “involution” of public power found by the inspection teams from the perspective of Weber's concepts of the modern rational bureaucracy and irrational “iron cage.” In fact, as we shall see, bureaucratic involution is the formalistic response of bureaucracy when supervised and reviewed. “Formalism” 形式主义 in this article refers to formalities for formalities' sake, which means officials only pay attention to the external forms yet ignore the actual effectiveness of their actions. Weber refers to the disadvantages brought about by the reproduction of bureaucracy as the “iron cage of bureaucracy” and believes that such irrationality of rationality needs an outside “charismatic” authority to develop a new system. Looking at the central inspection teams in practice, however, shows that the bureaucratic organizations will only further intensify formalism for self-preservation in the face of charismatic authority—for example, by “adding even more to the called-for quotas at every level” 层层加码. That is to say, if the charismatic authority does not break through the trap of bureaucratized patterns of thought and behavior, the iron cage will only be further strengthened and perpetuated.

Formalism: The Logic behind “Adding Even More to the Called-For Quotas at Every Level”

Emphasis on form over substance is a common problem of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy requires paperwork to document what is done; it also relies on formal written records to evaluate work performance. This mode of operation gives records and paperwork an essential role. Paperwork is not only the medium for communication among authorities at all levels, but also the basis upon which superior officials review and evaluate their subordinates. In this way, bureaucracy converts actual problems, as well as their solutions, into words and numbers on paper. This kind of subjective space of perception and description of the objective situation separates the paperwork from reality, such that the paperwork becomes the material reality itself, creating a logically perfect whole to demonstrate positive bureaucratic performance and achievements at all levels.

Bureaucracy extends its formalist operational mode to grassroots organizations through formal and data-based assessment indicators, forcing them to busy themselves with sorting out and preparing records and documents to deal with assessments by their superiors, rather than devoting their time to substantive work. It is much easier to observe and evaluate this kind of

formalist operational mode, such that its paperwork-based and quantitative process even spreads to the field of rectification and review in the form of “disciplinary inspections” from above. The bureaucratic system replaces actual rectification with the intensifying of work at every level, and the resulting rectification data, in turn, become the assessment basis for disciplinary review.

Formalistic Tendencies of Bureaucracy

In contemporary China, bureaucracy itself tends to operate in a formalistic way. Officials trapped in bureaucratism are only responsible to their superiors, thus leading to meaningless competition to compile and submit data. Moreover, unrealistic administrative goals on paper, already out of touch with objective realities, further push grassroots organizations toward even greater formalism. In other words, the transmission of bureaucratism to the very bottom leads to the formalization of rural governance. In 2013, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CCP Central Committee, pointed out that “formalism, the true nature of which is subjectivism and utilitarianism, originates from a faulty sense of work performance and the lack of a sense of responsibility” (quoted in Zhang, 2021: 85). By the end of October 2018, notices concerning a total of 130 cases of formalism and bureaucratism had been posted on the website of the CCDI (Guo, 2018). In 2018, the CCDI focused on addressing the following formalist issues:

Some officials carry out the spirit of the Central Committee of the CCP in a seemingly vigorous way, but actually [only] in the form of slogans and mechanical communications without digestion and further thinking, simply transmitting the spirit downward in a rough and general way; some officials only mouth slogans but seldom devote themselves to actual work, express opinions and positions but take no action, and set high key targets but have poor implementation, and are just keen to showcase their performance; some officials hold meetings just for the sake of holding a meeting, put into effect one document with another document, and engage in creating token records 表面文章 for show, while taking few practical actions and concrete measures; there are too many unnecessary inspections and assessments, in which a single matter is repeatedly checked by multiple departments. Still, the impractical content of performance appraisals, as well as the high frequency of assessments with requirements of various forms and records, result in heavy burdens on the grassroots organizations. (Zhou, 2018: 7)

In 2021, the CCDI issued the first group of model cases on discipline enforcement, the first of which concerned formalism and bureaucratism. In

that case, in February 2020, a county-level disciplinary organ found that a state farm had not prevented and controlled the COVID-19 pandemic effectively and therefore ordered it to undergo rectification 整改. Mr. He, who was in charge of the farm, did not seriously check the results of the rectification. Instead, he just signed and submitted the rectification report, claiming that the farm had met all the requirements. After that, the central inspection team made another on-site visit, only to discover that no corrective action had been taken. Consequently, Mr. He was accused of “putting into effect one document with another document” 以文件落实文件 (Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, 2021). The measures he took were just for formality’s sake and were used to show that the requirements of rectification had been well met. Ultimately, Mr. He’s behavior was identified as a kind of formalism and bureaucratism. In this case, the manifestation of formalism was the submission of a rectification report without making any actual improvements. Only an on-site inspection uncovered that misdeed, for such inspections emphasize realities over paperwork, which is quite different from the typical mode of bureaucracy.

Drawing up and passing on meaningless, unnecessary documents is a widely criticized operational mode of bureaucratic formalism. Government officials need to submit briefing notes for even the simplest of tasks, forcing them to frequently work overtime on weekday evenings and even on weekends. Among the model cases published by the CCDI, one concerned the number of documents issued by the party committee and government of Heyin township, Qinghai province, which had increased from 255 to 408—and the number of briefing notes from 73 to 118—in just one year (Wang, 2020). The Health Commission of Changji prefecture, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, issued 621 documents from January to July 2019, with an average of more than four documents per working day. Among those documents, 478 were issued through groups on the social platform QQ. Despite their large quantity, most of those documents were merely copies of notices from superior departments. The subordinate administrations just modified the titles and signatures of the original documents so that it would appear to others that they were working hard (Zhang, Qiao, and Song, 2020).

Creating paperwork records for show is another manifestation of the formalistic work style. Bureaucracy requires paperwork to document what has been done, and that operational mode tends to simplify actual work into filing forms and compiling records. Since such paperwork is the basis for superior officials’ evaluation of their subordinates, devoting more energy to sorting out paperwork seems to be a better and easier way for the lower-level units to demonstrate their work performance than taking concrete actions to solve real problems. Officials attempt to enhance their paperwork presence

in various ways, such as taking pictures to record their efforts instead of focusing on specific assignments, filling out similar information repeatedly on various forms, submitting reports on trivial issues to superiors, digitizing more routine work than the policy of rural governance digitization actually calls for, and showing their diligence by accessing working group apps or frequently showing up on WeChat work groups. As a result of such practices “the various digital platforms that should provide convenience and efficiency for grassroots cadres become a source of pressure instead” (Qiao and Hou, 2021: 44).

Clearly, the so-called digital office 数字办公, created to improve efficiency, has been transformed into a tool of formalism instead. One township cadre in South China was found to have “more than ten government affairs apps on his cell phone and more than twenty WeChat and QQ work groups.” As such, “every day he has to spend considerable time browsing the notifications from various online work groups. If he has a slight omission or a delayed response, he will be criticized in public by a notice” (Zhang, Qiao, and Song, 2020: 4). Furthermore, a college-graduate village head in a county in Central China was a member of more than 120 WeChat work groups, including water conservancy groups; party branch secretary groups; fire-, disaster-, and accident-prevention groups; civil affairs groups; and so on. Some WeChat work groups require members to sign in every day. Also, the different work systems of different departments ask officials to report the same information repeatedly on their separate forms, and some even require officials to remain online continuously twenty-four hours a day (Yu and Guo, 2019). Simply put, scientific and technological means have been transformed into tools for exercising bureaucratic control through endless reports and approvals. The formalistic requirements of digital offices take up an inordinate amount of the time of staff at the grassroots level. Thus, while formal bureaucratic control has been strengthened, the actual work effects have been weakened.

Furthermore, even the purposely practical method of field investigation and research work 调研 has been turned into a mere formalistic performance. Some local governments have established set routines for dealing with superiors’ investigations. No matter the subject of investigation, the local authorities always adopt the same methods to present the kind of rural life they want their superiors to see and submit reports of similar content to different superior authorities. In this way, the superior officials arrive at a preselected village, read well-polished materials, listen to carefully worded oral reports, and view well-arranged scenes. Ultimately, the research site becomes a stage to present an idealized version of reality. Some local authorities even select a group of “local extras” to perform the perfect daily life, in which every word and action is carefully scripted. To make the whole scenario look more real,

they add minor mistakes here and there to their predominant achievements so that they can present a picture of their work performance as one in which merits outweigh demerits (Liu and Dong, 2019).

Of course, unrealistic competition in terms of compiling and submitting data among local governments has not improved the real lives of the common people, who, although they should benefit from the performance, have instead fallen victim to it. For example, when promoting the “toilet revolution” 厕所革命, the government of Shenyang, Liaoning province, built public toilets outdoors, where the temperature can fall as low as -20°C , and also far away from villagers’ residential areas. Consequently, more than 50,000 of the approximately 80,000 public toilets built by the government at the cost of 100 million yuan were abandoned. In addition, bureaucrats are so focused on performance indicators that they disregard the interests of the people, ignoring the fact that the ultimate goal of performance indicators in the first place is the satisfaction of the people. To take housing demolition projects as an example, local governments do everything they can to complete a demolition task, even by forcibly pulling down houses and intimidating recalcitrant “nail households” 钉子户 with threats of adverse consequences for their children’s college admissions or civil service applications should they not comply (Shen and Guo, 2021).

Bureaucratic Accountability to Superior Authorities and Quantitative Assessment

The feature of bureaucratic accountability to superior authorities makes bureaucrats prioritize superficial tasks that are easily visible. Assignments that could have been easily completed within working hours are intentionally postponed to after-hours or even to holidays. Also, there are officials who busy themselves with meaningless work and those who showcase “dedication” to let their superiors see their diligence. There are various manifestations of formalistic overtime work, such as “posting a picture in WeChat Moments to display one’s diligence,” “pretending to work overtime by showing up in WeChat work groups,” and “remaining at work until the leader leaves the office” (Zhang, 2019). As a result, officials blindly compete on working hours, paying more attention to how they may appear to be diligent and active rather than to the actual effects of their work. This is why the involuntary work style prevails.

In terms of assessment, first, the metrics of work performance evaluation have been thoroughly formalized. According to a local township cadre in Hubei, he has to prepare quite a bundle of materials for the annual assessment. The assessment itself includes three to seven categories, each of which

is divided into ten major items and dozens of minor items. Almost every minor item requires supporting records, such as photos, forms, and work records. To some extent, there is a positive correlation between the result of the assessment and the thickness of the stack of formal written records submitted. A township cadre in Enshi prefecture, Hubei, recalled that he produced nearly 3,000 pages of paperwork and bound them into fifteen volumes during the 2017 annual assessment. In response to these sorts of problems, the Hubei Provincial Commission for Discipline Inspection issued the document “Taking Tough Action against Formalism and Bureaucratism in 2019” 集中整治形式主义、官僚主义问题2019年行动举措, resolutely taking on the serious problems of formalism that increase the burden on officials at the grassroots level (Yang and Zhong, 2019).

Second, the same work is repeatedly assessed by different departments. For instance, according to rough statistics of a subdistrict-level organization in eastern China, the organization was assessed on the basis of 79 categories across fourteen assessing departments in 2019, including industry, culture, education and health, and urban construction. A township cadre in western China reported that there is at least one work review every week on average, and some of the assessment items overlap. Supervisory divisions of different upper-level departments come one after another, but their requirements are quite similar, and they just review the same items repeatedly (Du and Guo, 2020). A COVID-19-related inspection in Jiangxi province found that at one gas station disinfection information was required to be registered on various forms from different departments, whose content was exactly the same although printed in a slightly different layout. The supervisory sections came and just checked their own forms; even if there was no time to do the disinfection as required, the forms must be filled out to avoid sanctions (Wang and Gan, 2020).

Finally, formalistic quantitative assessment has even been adopted in the field of inspections, as if work cannot be judged or reviewed without data provided by those who are subject to inspection. Thus, even measures that are intended to lighten the burden of formalistic requirements on officials at the grassroots level come in the form of groups of data. For example, a district-level government in Hubei implemented the policy “Twenty Measures to Solve Serious Problems of Formalism and Relieve the Burden on Grassroots Officials” 关于解决形式主义突出问题为基层减负的二十条措施, which stipulated that each document issued by the government and the party committee of the district not exceed ten pages or 5,000 words (An, 2019). The government of Kunming, Yunnan province, reduced the supervision and review checklist of 2019 to 88 items (a 56.6 percent reduction from the previous year), integrated eleven forms required by six discipline supervision and

inspection teams, and established a shared-table system for all departments (Ma, 2019). Qinghai province stipulated “a year of reduced burden for grassroots officials” 基层减负年 in which April and October were to be “months without meetings” 无会月 and the first week of the remaining months were to be “weeks without meetings” 无会周. It also required the number of documents issued to governments of the county level and below, as well as meetings held at the grassroots level, to be reduced by 30 percent. In addition, various assessments should be reduced by more than 90 percent, with quantitative burden-reduction targets set for each quarter of the year (Teng, 2019).

The Problem of “Adding Even More to the Called-For Quotas at Every Level”

“Adding even more to the called-for quotas at every level” 层层加码 refers to the layer-by-layer addition of more requirements to original policies as they are transmitted down through the bureaucracy (Guo, 2019). It usually occurs in the process of carrying out policies issued by the higher level, during which officials at the lower level add more requirements to the work quotas set by their superiors regardless of the actual situation in their jurisdictions. Their motivation for increasing their own workload is to be obsequious to their superiors and to shirk their responsibilities by seemingly behaving with due diligence. On January 18, 1961, Chairman Mao Zedong ordered: “Never intensify the work level by level, which disintegrates the central government, provinces and cities, districts and counties, and masses at the grassroots” (quoted in He, 2016: 14). In administrative practice, there are many forms of intensified work at each level. For example, local authorities raise standards and implement the strictest management in order to show the high standard of their work by overfulfilling quotas. In the case of combating the COVID-19 pandemic, the original policy stipulated that members of the public could commute freely between areas of low risk of infection if they had taken nucleic acid (polymerase chain reaction) tests and received negative results. But the authorities at the lower levels imposed even stricter requirements. They did not accept test results from hospitals outside of their administrative regions and required new arrivals to quarantine in a designated hotel and undergo another nucleic acid test. Even worse, the entire family of someone who had returned from another region had to stay at home for twenty-one days and obtain two negative nucleic acid test results before ending their quarantine. Another common form of intensifying the work quotas is to overfulfill the task in order to curry favor with those above. “If the superiors require five items, the lower-level officials will raise the number and complete eight” (Guo, 2021: 43).

Of course, these problems are not new but have been criticized throughout the CCP's history. In his 1933 speech "Pay Attention to Economic Work" 必须注意经济工作, Mao Zedong summarized two manifestations of bureaucratism: those who are perfunctory, ignore people's voices, and slack off at work; and those authoritarians who just pretend to work hard (Mao, 1991 [1951]: 124–25). Issued in 1953, the "Decision of the CCP Central Committee to Implement Instructions against Bureaucratism, Authoritarianism, and Violation of Laws and Discipline in Central Organizations" 中共中央在中央一级机关中具体执行关于反对官僚主义、反对命令主义和违法乱纪的指示的决定 defined "red-tapism" 文牍主义 and "routinism" 事务主义 as follows: more attention is paid in the former to the quantity of the work rather than its quality, and in the latter to superficial achievements rather than actual results (Party Literature Research Center of the CCP Central Committee, 1993). In 1963, Zhou Enlai's report "Twenty Manifestations of Bureaucratism" 官僚主义的二十种表现 listed the manifestations of bureaucratism, which included, among others, officials who pass the buck and shirk their duties; organizations that are overstaffed, in a mess, and become institutionalized; and the operational modes of red-tapism and formalism, requiring countless unnecessary instructions, reports, and meetings (Zhou, 2013 [1963]). Antonio Gramsci once described the crisis that ensues when a bureaucracy isolates itself from the people in such a manner: "there is no unity but a stagnant swamp, on the surface calm and 'mute,' and no federation but 'a sack of potatoes,' i.e., a mechanical juxtaposition of single 'units' without any connection between them" (Gramsci, 1971: 190).

Making the situation even worse, bureaucrats deal with inspections and reviews in a very formalistic way. In response to the criticism of "mechanically passing on the policy" they "improve" the situation by "intensifying the work" on paper, and in response to suggestions for rectification they implement only superficial, cosmetic measures. The summary report of the first round of inspection work of the Nineteenth Central Committee of the CCP (issued in 2018) pointed out the problems of formalism and the inadequacy of rectification measures. "Formalism and bureaucratism have been long established, and the problems of too many meetings, documents, and inspections have not been fundamentally resolved. In the implementation of rectification, some officials fail to take the problem seriously and make only superficial improvements or report false achievements" (Zhao, 2018: 04). Therefore, when reading the documents on problems pointed out by inspection teams and the corresponding rectification measures, readers are confused by political terms such as "the two responsibilities" 两个责任, "the four consciousnesses" 四个意识, and "the four services" 四个服务. From those generalized expressions, it is difficult to identify what the specific problem is and

what actions in response to the rectification suggestions have been taken. It seems that the discourse back and forth has completed the process of discovering and solving the problems, while there may be little actual improvement in reality.

Since 2019, actions to reduce the bureaucratic burden have been undertaken in various regions after the phenomenon of intensified work appeared. For example, forty-seven items identified as increasing quotas were cleaned up in the action of “comprehensively cleaning up increasing quotas at every level and resolutely reducing the burden on grassroots officials” carried out by a county in Sichuan (Zhou, 2021). The government of Hubei province supervised and resolved 641 cases, such as too many unnecessary assessments, and took disciplinary action against 1,137 people in one year (Zhang, 2020). In the process illustrated above, the underlying logic of intensified work is made clear. On the one hand, it is a way for lower-level bureaucrats to be responsible to superior officials and showcase their political achievements by data competition rather than actual work. On the other hand, it is a way for higher-level bureaucrats to evade possible accountability by intentionally increasing quotas and passing their duties on to the subordinate level by assigning it extra tasks.

In contrast to this intensification level by level, there is the opposite phenomenon of “diminishment level by level” 层层递减, which refers to diminished policy implementation level by level that is caused by the lack of pressure to transmit the policy downward 压力传导不到位. This mainly occurred in the seventh round of inspections of the party group of the Ministry of Education and the party committees of 31 colleges and universities whose presidents and party secretaries are jointly appointed by the CCP Central Committee and the State Council. The inspection was implemented by the Nineteenth Central Committee of the CCP in 2021. For example, the party committee of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics was found to have “diminished the strength of party building at each level and weakened basic-level party building” (Party Committee of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 2017). Its specific problems appeared in the fields of enriching party organizational life; carrying out the education projects of the party, that is, “three meetings and one lesson” 三会一课; and grassroots-level party building. Problems were cited with regard to the practices of party committees of various universities: Nanjing University, “inadequate pressure transmission”; Southeast University, “decreasing pressure transmission level by level”; Peking University, “deficiency in pressure transmission”; Sichuan University, “incomplete pressure transmission”; Wuhan University, “unfulfilled transmission of responsibilities and pressure”; Huazhong University of Science and Technology, “not transmitting

enough responsibilities and pressure at every level”; and Jilin University, “diminishing the pressure transmission at each level.” Their specific problems generally included insufficient supervision of state-owned assets and infrastructure projects; risks of corruption in school-run enterprises, affiliated hospitals, bidding and procurement procedures, and cooperative education; formalism and bureaucratism; and violations of the party’s eight-point frugality code (Wang and Lü, 2021).

As an article in the official journal of the CCDI points out, “intensifying the work at every level” or “increasing quotas level by level” fully reflects the involution of public power. The article vividly describes bureaucratic involution as follows: “If the provincial government raises ‘six requirements,’ the municipal government will increase it to ‘ten requirements,’ and the government of districts and counties will increase it to more than ten. It seems that the more the number of requirements, the better the work performance” (Huang, 2020: 36). Moreover, in practice, not only is the volume of work increased, but the deadlines for completion are brought forward. Work that needs to be submitted at the end of the month has to be completed at the beginning of the month, leaving enough time for document transmission through different levels of the bureaucracy. Grassroots organizations thus have a heavier work burden, but less processing time, which makes them only able to complete their work in a formalistic way. All in all, “adding even more to the called-for quotas at each level” is the formalistic response of the bureaucracy to the inspections from substantive authority.

Therefore, in the context of inspection and rectification, bureaucratic involution in this article refers to the process wherein formalistic pressures on the bureaucratic system result in bureaucrats at all levels being overloaded with paperwork while the real problems are not substantially improved. Officials submit more forms or paper records than are actually required and intensify work at each level in order to show the progress of and action in rectification in response to substantive inspections. What’s more, some organizations even eliminate well-functioning departments to avoid facing real problems. So, a seemingly self-correcting action may actually conceal that its ultimate goal is self-preservation.

The Formation of the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy

Max Weber’s theory of bureaucracy contains two meanings: it can refer to both a rational system of administrative organizations and to a specific group of bureaucrats. As a progressive historian, Weber advocated for bureaucracy as an authority based on specialized knowledge, yet as a liberal individualist, he also warned against bureaucracy as a “steel housing” (i.e., the iron cage)

(Ringer, 2004: 223). On the one hand, bureaucracy is the embodiment of a means-end rationality that achieves personal freedom but also limits that freedom in the pursuit of efficiency. On the other hand, modern bureaucracy and capitalism have seemingly achieved a separation of politics and economics, but in fact the class neutrality of bureaucracy has not been achieved, and bureaucracy itself may lead to the formation of new interest groups.

Means-end rationality brings calculability and predictability, which greatly enhances personal freedom and helps individuals to realize their choices. Modern life is characterized by the system of means-ends rationality—that is, “a definitely given end, methodical attainment of the end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means, and a clear awareness of the consequences of an action” (Feng, 1998: 63). The complexity of modern technology demands organizational discipline and intellectual expertise. The objectification of bureaucratic organization entails the removal of all the particularistic and uncontrollable factors such as personality and emotion from the system in order to make the whole organization a predictable machine and to best satisfy the rational demands of modern society. However, the other side of the division of labor and specialization—the strength of bureaucracy—is the atomization of each mechanical part and the fragmentation of meaning. Although the division of labor promotes specialization, the horizontal division of departments and vertical division of procedures lead to a situation in which each department is no longer oriented to the situation as a whole and where fragmented functions dissolve the meaning of the whole. In real life, each department takes charge of its own specialized government service, with little coordination among them, thus making people run from pillar to post to acquire the necessary approvals. As a consequence, individuals are reduced to “cogs in the machine” or are “trapped in an ‘iron cage’ that formal rationalization has spawned with irresistible efficiency and at the expense of substantive rationality” (Kim, n.d.). Means-end rationality, which is supposed to enhance personal freedom, becomes an iron cage that restricts freedom.

Bureaucracy as an Iron Cage

First of all, although bureaucracy flaunts the separation of liberal economy and rational bureaucracy, it cannot in fact free politics from the influence of economics. Weber pointed out the “elective affinity” (*wahlverwandtschaft*) between bureaucracy and capitalism in that the development of capitalism requires a stable and calculable administrative system. Both leaders and participants of a bureaucratic organization can calculate the results of their actions, thus making it superior to other types of organizations in terms of

pure technology, efficiency, and breadth of operation. In turn, capitalism also provides the most rational economic basis for the development of bureaucracy into its most rational form (Weber, 2010 [1978]: 312–13). Weber “characterized bureaucracy as a crucial element in the rationalization of modern political and economic institutions: technically efficient, sustained by specialized knowledge, and indispensable as an organizational device in every realm of modern life” (Ringer, 2004: 221).

The belief that state control could tame private capitalism paved the way for universal bureaucracy, but Weber argued that “future human beings will be forced to enter ‘the housing for the new bondage’ [the iron cage]—if ‘rational bureaucratic administration’ is their ‘ultimate value’” (Ringer, 2004: 222). Weber used the term “rational” to describe the process of “disenchantment” in the European religious worldview. As a fundamental feature of this rationalization process, “capitalism” becomes a holistic form of modern civilization. The capitalist economic form is understood as an economy with rational ends, and bureaucracy is understood as the institutionalization of administrative behavior (Wang, 2022 [2008]: 378–79). The role of entrepreneurs is closer to that of politicians than bureaucrats. Entrepreneurs wage a struggle for economic survival, winning the market by virtue of their ability to take risks and innovate; bureaucrats, however, seek a secure and pensionable income commensurate with their status (Weber, 2009 [1978]: 132). The danger of universal bureaucracy is that the whole social network “operates according to the formalized rules of bureaucratic organizations and the guild system that accompanies bureaucracy, with its elaborate documentation required for every action (including academic and other actions)” (Weber, 2010 [1978]: 257).

This is also a common phenomenon in China today. People need to fill out endless forms on matters both big and small; government departments stick to formalized rules, ignoring everything beyond their specific functions and powers and justifying their idleness and inactivity on the grounds of rule compliance; the departments set up barriers at every level, making it impossible for people to move an inch if any procedure is blocked; and the documents are intrinsically entangled, with departments passing the buck to each other.

At the 1909 meeting of the Association for Social Policy (*Verein für Socialpolitik*), Alfred Weber, Max Weber’s brother, emphasized clearly that bureaucracy was only a technical instrument and that for a technical official “public service is divested of all emotional value” (quoted in Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 64). In the same debate, Max Weber “emphasized the character of bureaucracy as ‘precise, soulless and machine-like’” (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 64). The Weber brothers were roundly criticized for their attacks on

bureaucracy because they saw it as just a technical tool that invariably reflected the class structure of society. Fellow meeting participant Paul Kompert argued that the Weber brothers' criticism was based on a bureaucratic concept derived from the Prussian experience and that it was inappropriate to offer a general critique of bureaucracy on the basis of Prussian specificity (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 85).

Commenting on the Russian Revolution of 1905, Weber already realized the bureaucratic threat to individual freedom, equality, and cultural vitality. He pointed out that current developments were pointing away from democracy and individualism. He wrote that "everywhere . . . the steel housing [i.e., the iron cage] for the new bondage stands ready" (quoted in Ringer, 2004: 221). Technological and economic progress had slowed, rents had trumped profits, and free soil and markets were exhausted. He argued that it was "ridiculous to ascribe to high capitalism . . . an elective affinity with 'democracy' or 'freedom,'" when all signs pointed in the opposite direction (Ringer, 2004: 221–22).

Weber distrusted bureaucracy in a capitalist system but contended that bureaucracy in a socialist system would be even worse. In Wang Hui's words, despite "modern capitalism's attempts to create a self-perpetuating market economy and a 'depoliticized' order" (Wang and Xu, 2006: 238), ordinary workers cannot be a rival to capital and oligarchy on a formally rational platform of the rule of law. The normative order of formal rationality can only be the order dominated by capital, and the public rights and interests cannot be truly protected. According to Weber, the situation for workers would be even worse under socialism since government bureaucratic organizations would take over completely; at that point, the government would be the ultimate employer, and "the worker would find no one within the spheres of law and administration who would have an interest in taking his side against his employer, now the state itself" (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 84).

A Neutral Class or a New Class?

As a matter of fact, bureaucracy is not an independent force standing above social classes. For Weber, ideally, bureaucracies could be independent of the limits of their class and only serve as a tool of rulership; the beliefs of bureaucrats constituted what Weber called a "code of honor"; they saw themselves as impartial and as "true interpreters of the national interest" (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 73). In the practice of real political life, however, Weber and his brother Alfred opposed this "conservative" view of bureaucracy, most famously attributed to Gustav Schmoller. For Schmoller, a representative of the conservative wing of the Association for Social Policy and historian of

the Prussian administration, bureaucracy was a neutral force above competing parties and classes with its own special interests and reflected the general interests of society as a whole; despite its cumbersome formalities and bureaucratic habits, as a neutral and independent political force, the organization was well suited to deal with social affairs (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 63–64).

Although the ideal bureaucracy was glorified as universal and altruistic, in reality, bureaucracy could not be separated from the social class to which it belonged. In the German politics of Weber's time, Prussian bureaucracy was a tool of the ruling Junker class. That landowning aristocracy determined the main features of German policy by exerting influence on the bureaucratic organization and the army. In light of this context, the Webers believed that in practice bureaucracy was essentially just a technical tool that could not rid itself of the class structure of society. As Alfred Weber sharply pointed out, "It is a fundamental error to imagine that bureaucracy has the characteristic of being independent of any social basis. It finds its social basis in those power groups which control the organization of society" (quoted in Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 66).

In the meantime, Max Weber also noted the general social impact of bureaucracy beyond its instrumental functions. As an organization of high social status with great power, bureaucracy not only influences politics, but also exerts a significant influence on social culture and values. In terms of social stratification, bureaucracy fosters social equality, especially breaking the privilege based on family background and serving as the driving force behind social democratization and the leveling of social differences (Weber, 2010 [1978]: 314). In addition, the society-wide bureaucracy forms a new stratum of bureaucrats, making educational qualifications a new social barrier. Academic diplomas are associated with resources such as positions with salaries and pensions, and the social prestige that those so educated possess. However, social class or economic factors are not eliminated in this process. Indeed, Weber identified officialdom as a status stratum (*Stand*) "whose attitudes and ideals are normative for the rest of society: they are the 'specific bearers of all conventions.' Such strata might overlap or coincide with economic classes . . . because the sons of the wealthy were advantageously placed to acquire the education necessary for status-group membership" (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 80).

The Self-production of Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy itself may form new interest groups. Theoretically, the bureaucratic organization is only an impersonal department. According to Weber,

the rational feature of bureaucracy is that it is governed by means of specialization (Weber, 2010 [1978]: 311). Bureaucratic administrative systems are superior mainly because of the role played by specialization. Bureaucrats abide by impersonal rules and due process. They are specially trained to treat the same events in the same way and to continue to follow the rules even when they disagree with them.

In reality, however, a bureaucracy forms “a separate group within the state, with their own special interests, values, and power basis.” “Its separate interests lay in the maintenance and extension of administrative positions and power; its distinctive outlook lay in a belief in its own superior objectivity in interpreting the national interest free from party bias; its power lay in its knowledge and experience and in the cloak of secrecy with which it concealed its operations. While these features were important to its effectiveness as a technical instrument, they also helped mould a bureaucracy into a special group within the state, with its own separate interests” (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 72).

David Beetham pointed out the necessity of bureaucratic self-production: “These deviations from the ‘ideal type’ are not accidental, but systematic. Bureaucracy is not merely a technical instrument; it is also a social force with interests and values of its own, and as such has social consequences over and above its instrumental achievements. As a power group it has the capacity to influence the goals of the political system; as a status stratum it has a more unconscious effect upon the values of society at large” (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 67).

Therefore, Weber believed that the urgent political problem is how to effectively control the growing state bureaucracy so as to save some room for personal freedom. Turning to the British political model, Weber advocated establishing parliamentary commissions of inquiry that, in defiance of the notion of bureaucratic official secrecy, would force bureaucrats to be cross-examined by them under oath, thereby gaining some control over the bureaucratic machine (Ringer, 2004: 222–23). In the same fashion, as a revolutionary force, a charismatic authority can break through the routinized bureaucratic process, allowing rationalization to develop in a new direction.

Central Inspection Teams: A Transformative Charismatic Authority

Weber was ambivalent about bureaucratic rationality. Even if the bureaucracy is perfectly developed as a tool, its inherent defects will be revealed once it exceeds its own limits. Secret knowledge and expertise make a

bureaucracy technically effective, but they can stretch powers beyond their inherent limits. Therefore, the central political problem of bureaucracy is how to limit it to its functions and how to ensure that the power of bureaucrats is subordinated to the functions of politicians so that power serves the latter's goals and is accountable to them (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 78–79).

In the case of inspection teams, the self-production of bureaucracy manifests itself in the use of power to secure its own existence, even against the interests of the goals it serves. In the face of inspection and review, the self-protective mechanism of bureaucracy converts substantive criteria into formalistic ones, separates the solution on paper from the actual resolution of a problem in reality, solves problems in merely a superficial way, and even consolidates and expands the bureaucracy itself. In the end, then, the procedures and formal written records, originally created to restrict the arbitrariness of bureaucrats, become a kind of formalistic procedural truth concocted by bureaucrats. In other words, bureaucrats manage to turn institutional restrictions into a protective mechanism to evade their own accountability.

Inspection teams function similarly to Weber's charismatic authority in terms of discovering and rectifying formalism and bureaucratism. The operational mode of inspection teams is realistic action and field investigation, paying more attention to the actual situation of governance beyond the paperwork. Such a working mode may restrain the formalized tendencies of bureaucracy. Inspection teams are able to break through secret knowledge and realize intraparty 党内 supervision in the bureaucratic system. Therefore, inspection teams aim at bringing about a "self-revolution" of the bureaucracy to inhibit the making of the iron cage, through the supervision and review of cadres and the discovery and resolution of the problems of bureaucratism and formalism.

Bureaucrats and Cadres

Weber made a clear distinction between bureaucrats and politicians. In terms of responsibility, bureaucrats bear no personal responsibility for policy itself and are only accountable to their superiors for policy advice and implementation. Although bureaucrats may disagree, once policy is established, bureaucrats will implement it with discipline and self-denial. While bureaucrats are trained to perform their duties, politicians are personally accountable for policy. Second, in terms of the difference between administration and politics, bureaucrats work in organizations, issue and obey orders, act according to set rules, and monopolize access to certain key types of information because of their specialization, whereas politics is a struggle for allies and followers. Third, in terms of language, bureaucrats use language accurately

and objectively to write memos or issue orders, while politicians use language to object to opposing views and to win supporters (Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 76–77).

While socialist cadres perform bureaucratic functions, they are also subject to substantive inspections. “Cadres are a decisive factor, once the political line is determined,” Mao Zedong once explained. “We [therefore] have the responsibility for organizing and training them and for taking good care and making proper use of them” (Mao, 1965: 202). Outlining how to “take good care of” cadres, Mao suggested, among other methods, checking their work and persuasion: “check up on their work, and help them sum up their experience, carry forward their achievements and correct their mistakes. To assign work without checking up and to take notice only when serious mistakes are made—that is not the way to take care of cadres”; “in general, use the method of persuasion with cadres who have made mistakes, and help them correct their mistakes. The method of struggle should be confined to those who make serious mistakes and nevertheless refuse to accept guidance” (Mao, 1965: 203).

The main task of the inspection system is to supervise party cadres. The nature of the inspection is to “warn beforehand” rather than to “punish afterward.” The purpose of the central inspection teams is to identify and solve the incipient problems of “top leaders,” which is intended to protect leading cadres. In the history of the CCP, the nature of inspection has been separately defined in different documents. “Central Circular No. 5—Inspection Regulations,” from October 1928, clearly states that the inspection system is the key approach to ensuring that all strategies, work plans, and guidance of the higher party organs are correctly accepted and implemented by the lower ones. In 2004, the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee made it clear that the purpose of inspection is not to strengthen the party’s ties with the people but to supervise leading cadres, especially key leading cadres.

Inspection is political rather than professional, checking up on party organizations and leading cadres instead of their departments or routine work, and its core concerns are the construction of the party work style and clean government 党风廉政建设和 the fight against corruption. More specifically, it covers four areas—work style, discipline, corruption, and cadre selection. The problem of “pressure transmission” 压力传导 mainly appears in the field of anticorruption. In order to ensure that the strict management of the party extends to the grassroots level, the central government requires that “pressure be transmitted down through all levels of the bureaucracy” 层层传导压力. City- and county-level inspections are the basic link between authorities at all levels, as well as an effective institutional arrangement for

grassroots organizations to enforce strict party discipline. The purpose of transmitting pressure at every level is to make certain that the inspections nationwide are in strict accordance with the unified deployment of the central government. Therefore, it is necessary to “transmit pressure at every level and to promote the nationwide inspections to be implemented consistently, so that responsibility and pressure can be turned into a deterrent force for effective inspection and supervision (Xu, 2014). The relevant party committee is responsible for the overall inspection work—the party secretary personally supervises it, and every party committee supervises the lower one so that the upper and lower levels are linked together to fulfill their responsibility (Central Inspection Leading Group, 2018). In 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized the need to strengthen the supervision of rectification after inspections by making the party group/party committee secretaries responsible for ensuring that all problems have been attended to (Xinhua, 2017a). In building teams of leading cadres, on the one hand, the predictability of the whole system can be guaranteed through bureaucracy; on the other hand, the human factor cannot be neglected, i.e., cadres should be closely linked to responsibilities, in order to prevent the risk of bureaucratic formalization and detachment from reality.

Specialization and Transparency

The inspection team is able to break through the barrier of specialized bureaucratic knowledge and job secrecy. Thus “inspection work can solve those problems that are beyond the reach of mass supervision, inconvenient for public opinion supervision, and difficult for internal supervision” (Zhang, 2004: 11). There are no excluded areas or exceptions to party supervision, so inspection work can cover everything. The knowledge on which bureaucratic power depends falls into two categories: first, specialization obtained through training, that is, technical knowledge; and second, civil service knowledge, that is, specific information closely related to the one’s bureaucratic position. Through the concept of official secrets, bureaucrats can turn such official knowledge into secret knowledge, thereby protecting the administrative organs from external control.

Furthermore, bureaucrats can keep out outsiders by taking advantage of the concept of official secrecy, and even rulers or political leaders are subject to their own bureaucratic experts. Consequently, the bureaucracy exceeds its advisory and executive functions and takes control of decision making. Historically, because of ignorance and inexperience, the Russian and German monarchs were in just such a powerless position when it came to their bureaucratic advisors. As Weber wrote, “The monarch imagines it is he who is

ruling, when in fact what he is doing is providing a screen, behind which the apparatus can enjoy the privilege of power without control of responsibility” (quoted in Beetham, 1985 [1974]: 75).

Therefore, in order to break through the bureaucracy’s protective barriers, the inspection team uses a variety of methods to mobilize the people to air their complaints—such as publicizing its phone numbers and setting up special mailboxes to encourage people to get in touch with it. In supervision and inspection in colleges and universities, inspection teams have been required to listen extensively to the opinions of party members, cadres, teachers, students, and staff, so as to fully take into account their functions and strengths. From 2012 to 2017, in cases on file for investigation and review by the CCDI, more than 60 percent of initial tips on problems come from inspections (Xinhua, 2017b). With regard to letters received by the Henan Provincial Commission for Discipline Inspection, more than 80 percent are from grassroots cadres and the general public, of which more than 70 percent report violations of discipline and law by cadres at or below the township level (Gong and Wang, 2015). If the anticorruption and supervisory system is a bottom-up one in which the public participates, there will be more openness and transparency and no need for intensified inspections and appointing new inspectors to supervise the previous ones (Yuan, 2013).

Intensified Inspection Work and Formalistic Expansion

From May 2013 to June 2017, a total of twelve rounds of inspections were completed by the Eighteenth Central Committee of the CCP. The number of central inspection teams rose from ten in the first round to fifteen by the twelfth round. In 2018, a supervision system was deployed linking all levels of the bureaucracy, including central, provincial, municipal, and county-level inspections. In 2019, central inspection teams carried out inspections in 108 subordinate party organizations, meaning that the “full coverage” target of the term of office from 2018 to 2022 had been half-finished within the first two years (Zhao, 2020). Up to February 2022, the central inspection teams has inspected 262 party committees, with the coverage rate rising to more than 90 percent (Xu, 2022).

Inspection work intensified because of problems such as inspecting strictly at first yet becoming more lenient afterward, falsifying rectification reports, failing to implement policies with strict standards and actual effectiveness, pretending to work hard, and making only perfunctory efforts (Shen, 2018). Inspection teams are required to perform their duties with wide coverage, high intensity, and high frequency. In this way, party organizations under inspection are forced to implement rectification by external pressure.

Innovation in the format of inspection can facilitate both the identification of new issues and the rectification of old ones.

The first such innovation was the dispatching of “special inspection” 专项巡视 teams to state-owned enterprises to root out corruption. From 2013 to 2014, the proportion of regular inspections was higher than that of special inspections. In 2014, special inspections were adopted in the third round of inspection. In 2015, as an anticorruption “pacesetter” 尖兵 and disciplinary review “outpost” 前哨, special inspections mainly focused on key cadres, key affairs, and key issues to resolve problems and promote the management and governance of the party in accordance with the rules (Shen, 2015). Second, in 2016, special inspections began to be carried out in conjunction with the “looking back” 回头看 strategy. Starting with the ninth round of inspection in that year, the Central Committee arranged to carry out “looking back” in every round by rechecking four provinces, autonomous regions, and/or municipalities, the purpose being not just to ensure the rectification of old problems but also to identify new ones (Feng and Wang, 2019). Third, in 2017, the revised “Regulations on the Inspection Work of the Communist Party of China” 中国共产党巡视工作条例 incorporated inspection into routine work, stipulating that inspections of subordinate party organizations be carried out on a “full coverage” 全覆盖 basis during the term of office of the Central Committee (five years). Fourth, “random” mobile 机动式 inspections were added to the twelfth round of inspection in 2017. Each mobile group consisted of five to six members who could be dispatched to deal with key special issues. Fifth, the frequency and process of inspections became more regularized 常规化.

In the face of such inspection teams and their rectification demands, the bureaucracy, as we have seen, tends to respond in a purely formalistic manner by intensifying the pressure layer by layer, thereby generating even more paperwork. As Huang (2021a: 181) notes, “it is [thus] possible for the bureaucrats themselves to avoid taking responsibility by relying on the fictions of formalization and data-fabrication.” As a result, the inspection teams in turn increase the intensity of their inspections in order to improve the situation. For instance, in response to poor rectification of uncovered problems, quantitative requirements were proposed to ensure that the bureaucrats themselves were held accountable. The time limit for rectification is two months. Relevant departments are to deal with the problems uncovered by inspection teams by compiling checklists of the problems, tasks, and responsibilities in order to make the rectification work quantifiable, inspectable, and accountable (Xu, 2018). Once again, however, this approach of checklists and quantification is a formalist one that reduces actual problems into paperwork and

figures, thereby repeating the bureaucratic cycle of paperwork but hardly impacting the substance of issues at hand.

The expansion of bureaucracy in this fashion may even weaken the influence of a charismatic authority. Weber pointed out the inevitability of bureaucracy and its irreversible and uncontrollable tendency. If the people controlled by bureaucracy desire to escape its influence, they need to establish another organization to do so, but that organization in turn will become similarly bureaucratized (Weber, 2010: 312). And this new iron cage is even more difficult to resist. On the one hand, its revolutionary appearance makes it difficult for people to recognize as an iron cage. On the other hand, it is so perfectly institutionalized and self-consistent that it becomes even more impervious to change.

Conclusion

Weber worried about the future of bureaucracy. Although rational bureaucracy realizes the impartial and specialized management of social affairs, it dominates every aspect of society and restricts the freedom of individuals. The final stage of such institutionalization is dehumanization and rigidity. People become little more than cogs in a vast machine, and it is almost impossible to get rid of the supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life. In Weber's view, the only way to escape from this iron cage of bureaucracy would be through the emergence of a transformative charismatic leader with a new system or ideology to replace the old one. Unfortunately, though, the bureaucracy, once created, will operate to make itself indispensable to anyone trying to wield power, reproducing the cage in perpetuity. As a tool of rulership, it does not necessarily serve a specific government. "Even in the case of armed revolution, generally speaking, the bureaucratic machine will continue to operate, just as it had under the previous legitimate government" (Weber, 2010 [1978]: 312). In this way, the bureaucratic system seems to eliminate the possibility of a true revolution. Even if the charismatic authority breaks the cage and brings forth another system, the new system, as a result of the routinization of charisma, would still be bureaucratized.

As for bureaucratic involution in the context of contemporary China, attention should be paid to the tendency of new organizations to bureaucratize. The operational mode of bureaucracy that is based on paperwork and formal written records separates actual problems from the administrative process, with the result that bureaucrats tend to "solve" problems by resorting to passing on documents through the levels of bureaucracy. Since paperwork tends to lose touch with reality, rational bureaucracy may fall into the trap of bureaucratized patterns of thought and behavior. Then, the bureaucrats' work

will become more formalistic; they are only responsible to their superiors and tend to ignore the people's interests. Obsequious to their superiors and evasive of their own accountability, bureaucrats tend to focus on their performance appraisal and add even more to the called-for quotas at every level regardless of the actual situation. Consequently, their complex procedures and laborious paperwork and records make little difference for actual realities. To solve the problems of bureaucratism and formalism, the inspection teams carry out field investigation, learn about the real conditions of local governance beyond the paperwork, and propose rectification requirements. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats respond to these inspection reviews by intensifying their work instead of taking effective action; such a phenomenon originates from the formalistic work style.

An important reason for bureaucratic involution is bureaucrats' responsibility to their superiors and their ignorance of the people, both of which are unavoidable in a top-down bureaucratic system. Officials showcase their political achievements by intensifying their work in the formalistic way, which is used as proof of diligence and responsibility. If officials were to truly work for the benefit of the people, their formalistic work style would not make sense, for the people know the actual realities and would not accept fake data or falsified reports. And the endless rounds of meetings and the mountains of documents would be meaningless if they could not improve the people's living conditions. Rectification measures would be dismissed as merely superficial efforts if problems related to the vital interests of the people were not resolved. As a result, the key to resolving the problem of bureaucratic involution is a bottom-up system for public participation that combines responsibility to upper officials and responsibility to the grassroots, such that the principle of "centering on the people" 以人民为中心 will be fully implemented.

As General Secretary Xi Jinping has pointed out, formalism originates from a faulty sense of work performance and the lack of a sense of responsibility. Bureaucrats' entrapment in formalism lies in their prioritizing of self-interest over "the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people," and in their disregard of the ultimate evaluation criterion, that is, the satisfaction of the people. Therefore, the basic way to resolve these problems and to overcome the bureaucratic tendency to lose touch with realities is to draw on the tradition of the strong bond between the party and the people, "and rely on the great energy of dyadic interaction between the state and its people" (Huang, 2021b: 6). Under the leadership of the party and with the involvement of the people, official plans would better reflect the people's interests, policies would be implemented more in accordance with the people's needs, and performance assessments would be more in line with the popular will.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Philip C. C. Huang and Kathryn Bernhardt for helpful comments and remarks.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- AN JIXUAN 岸纪宣 (2019) “湖北省武汉市江岸区: 减数量压篇幅向文山说再见” (Jiang'an, Hubei: say goodbye to too much paperwork by reducing its number and length). *中国纪检监察* 15: 55.
- BEETHAM, DAVID (1985 [1974]) *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Central Commission for Discipline Inspection 中央纪委国家监委 (2021) “中央纪委国家监委发布第一批执纪执法指导性案例” (The first group of guiding cases for discipline and law enforcement issued by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the Ministry of Supervision of the CCP). *廉政瞭望* 15: 14.
- Central Inspection Leading Group 中央巡视工作领导小组 (2018) “深入贯彻落实中央巡视工作五年规划不断巩固深化发展巡视工作” (Thoroughly implement the five-year plan of central inspections and continuously consolidate the development of inspection work). *中国纪检监察* 4: 8–17.
- CHENG HUIXIA 程惠霞 (2017) “巡视组反腐败动力机制及其增强路径” (Anti-corruption inspection teams: mechanisms for their empowerment and approaches to their function improvement). *南京师大学报 (社会科学版)* 4: 44–52.
- DU XIAOGUANG 杜晓光 and GUO MIAOLAN 郭妙兰 (2020) “一拨拨检查督导让基层苦不堪言” (Basic-level organizations are overwhelmed by endless review and supervision). *中国纪检监察杂志* 22: 48–49.
- FENG GANG 冯刚 (1998) “科层制与领袖民主: 论M.韦伯的自由民主思想” (Bureaucracy and charismatic leadership democracy: Max Weber's thought on liberal democracy). *社会学研究* 4: 62–70.
- FENG LIUJIAN 冯留建 and WANG YUQING 王雨晴 (2019) “新时代党内巡视制度的政治功能研究” (On the political function of the intra-party inspection system in the new era). *华北电力大学学报 (社会科学版)* 1: 11–17.
- GONG JINXING 龚金星 and WANG HANCHAO 王汉超 (2015) “巡察覆盖市县 监督不留盲区” (Inspections covering cities and counties without any blind spots). *人民日报*, May 26.

- GRAMSCI, ANTONIO (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers.
- GUO MIAOLAN 郭妙兰 (2018) “从130起问题看整治形式主义、官僚主义力度越来越大” (Observing the intensified rectification of formalism and bureaucratism from 130 cases). *中国纪检监察杂志* 22: 49–50.
- GUO MIAOLAN (2021) “警惕层层加码扭曲政策初衷” (Be wary of distorting the original intention of a policy by adding even more to the called-for quotas). *中国纪检监察杂志* 15: 42–44.
- GUO SUJIAN 郭苏建 and ZHONG SHI 钟时 (2021) “新时代中国共产党党内巡视制度调适的趋势与基础” (Tendencies and foundation of the adjustment of the CCP's intra-party inspection system in the new era). *治理研究* 5: 70–78.
- HE JIANHUA 何建华 (2016) “‘层层加码’: 败坏实事求是作风” (“Adding even more to the called-for quotas”: undermining the work style of seeking truth from facts) *人民论坛* 20: 14–15.
- HU SHENG 胡生 (2019) “1949–2019: 中国共产党巡视制度述略” (1949–2019: a brief account of the CCP's inspection system). *中州学刊* 7: 126–33.
- HUANG ZONGZHI 黄宗智 [Philip C. C. Huang] (2021a) “农业内卷和官僚内卷: 类型、概念、经验概括、运作机制” (Agricultural involution and bureaucratic involution: types, concepts, empirical generalizations, and operative mechanisms). *Rural China* 18, 2: 169–91. <https://www.lishiyushehui.cn/article/item/1092>.
- HUANG ZONGZHI [Philip C. C. Huang] (2021b) “民主主义与群众主义之间: 中国民众与国家关系的历史回顾与前瞻愿想” (Between democracy and the mass line: the historical retrospection and visionary prospect of the relation between the Chinese people and the state). *文史哲* 2: 5–15.
- HUANG YUE 黄月 (2020) “警惕公权力运行中的‘内卷’现象” (Be vigilant against the phenomenon of “involution” in the exercise of public power). *中国纪检监察* 24: 36–37.
- JIANG JING 蒋晶 (2021) “中国共产党巡视制度的百年发展历程与现实启示” (The centennial development course and realistic enlightenment of the inspection system of the Chinese Communist Party). *行政与法* 7: 89–98.
- KIM, SUNG HO (n.d.) “Max Weber.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/weber/>.
- LI LI 李莉 and WU JIANG 吴江 (2019) “巡视制度的创新与发展——基于2013–2017年中央巡视组273份巡视报告的文本分析” (The innovation and new development of the inspection system: an analysis of 273 central inspection group reports from 2013 to 2017). *广州大学学报 (社会科学版)* 4: 67–73.
- LIU PINXIN 刘品新 and CAI LEI 蔡磊 (2020) “中国反腐败指数与规律 (2013–2017年)” (Index and regulations of China's anti-corruption work, 2013–2017). *武汉科技大学学报 (社会科学版)* 4: 117–27.
- LIU ZHESHU 刘哲姝 and DONG FEICHEN 董菲晨 (2019) “别掉进调研中的形式主义套路” (Avoid being trapped in formalism in investigation and research). *中国纪检监察杂志* 10: 11.

- MA WEI 马惟 (2019) “云南昆明: 精准整治为基层松绑减负” (Kunming, Yunnan: accurate rectification has loosened the shackles and reduced the burden on basic-level organizations). *中国纪检监察杂志* 17: 38.
- MAO ZEDONG (1965) *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Volume II*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- MAO ZEDONG 毛泽东 (1991 [1951]) *毛泽东选集* (Selected works of Mao Zedong). Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.
- Party Committee of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics 中共北京航空航天大学党委 (2017) “中共北京航空航天大学党委关于巡视整改情况的通报” (Circular of the party committee of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics on the inspection and rectification situation). 中央纪委监察部网站, Aug. 25. https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/201708/t20170825_149166.html.
- Party Literature Research Center of the CCP Central Committee 中共中央文献研究室 (1993) *建国以来重要文献选编* (Selected documents since the establishment of the PRC). Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe.
- QIAO ZIXUAN 乔子轩 and HOU YINING 侯逸宁 (2021) “靠‘资料秀’怎能干好工作” (A good job does not depend on a “documents showcase”). *中国纪检监察杂志* 10: 44–47.
- RINGER, FRITZ (2004) *Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- SHAN LINGZHI 单灵芝 (2021) “政党治理视角下党内巡视制度的技术与价值研究” (Research on the technique and value of the intra-party inspection system from the perspective of party governance). *科学社会主义* 1: 129–35.
- SHEN YE 沈叶 (2015) “专项巡视为国企反腐加码” (Special inspections to reinforce anti-corruption in state-owned enterprises) *中国纪检监察杂志* 4: 8–10.
- SHEN YE (2018) “加强对巡视整改的日常监督” (Strengthening routinized supervision over inspection and rectification). *中国纪检监察* 15: 22–23.
- SHEN YE 沈叶 and GUO MIAOLAN 郭妙兰 (2021) “‘一刀切式落实’, 为何屡禁难绝” (“One-size-fits-all” implementation, why it is difficult to eliminate despite repeated prohibitions). *中国纪检监察杂志* 8: 38–41.
- TANG JIAN 唐坚 (2021) “中国共产党巡视制度的变迁特征与演进逻辑——基于1996年–2020年间44份党内法规文本的内容分析” (The changing characteristics and evolutionary logic of the CCP’s inspection system: analysis based on forty-four intra-party regulations from 1996 to 2020). *领导科学论坛* 2: 5–13.
- TENG JIACAI 滕佳材 (2019) “整治形式主义、官僚主义必须以党的政治建设为统领” (Rectification of formalism and bureaucratism should be directed by political construction of the party). *中国纪检监察杂志* 17: 34–35.
- WANG HUI 汪晖 (2022 [2008]) *去政治化的政治: 短20世纪的终结与90年代* (The politics of depoliticizing politics: the end of the short twentieth century and the 1990s). Beijing: Sanlian shudian.
- WANG HUI 汪晖 and XU YAN 许燕 (2006) “‘去政治化的政治’与大众传媒的公共性——汪晖教授访谈” (Depoliticized politics and the publicness of mass media: interview with Wang Hui). *甘肃社会科学* 4: 235–48.

- WANG JUN 王君 and GAN SHILIAN 甘士莲 (2020) “工作不到位填表来整改” (Rectifying incompetence by filling out forms). *中国纪检监察杂志* 14: 44.
- WANG LIFENG 王立峰 (2018) “《中国共产党巡视工作条例》解读” (Interpretation of the “Regulations on the Inspection Work of the Communist Party of China”). *领导科学论坛* 8: 34–46.
- WANG SHENGXIA 王生霞 (2020) “发文数量年年增多这个乡镇党委被通报” (Criticism of a township-level party committee for issuing an increasing number of documents). *中国纪检监察杂志* 14: 31.
- WANG ZHUO 王卓 and LÜ JIARONG 吕佳蓉 (2021) “十九届中央第七轮巡视完成反馈” (The feedback of the seventh round of inspection carried out by the Nineteenth Central Committee of the CCP). 中央纪委国家监委网站, Sept. 5. https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/toutiao/202109/t20210905_146928.html.
- WEBER, MAX 马克斯·韦伯 (2009 [1978]) 韦伯政治著作选 (Weber's political writings). Translated by Yan Kewen 阎克文. Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe.
- WEBER, MAX 马克斯·韦伯 (2010 [1978]) 经济与历史 支配的类型 (Economy and history: types of domination). Translated by Kang Le 康乐. Nanning: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe.
- XING HAO 邢浩 (2017) “在实践中不断擦亮巡视利剑——十八届中央十二轮巡视反馈和整改要求演变研究” (Constantly polishing the sword of inspection in practice: a study of the evolution of the feedback and rectification requirements of the twelfth-round inspection carried out by the Eighteenth Central Committee of the CCP). *党的文献* 6: 54–61.
- Xinhua 新华社 (2017a) “要加强巡视整改情况的督查, 把责任压给党组(党委)书记” (Strengthening the supervision of rectification after inspections by making the party group/party committee secretaries responsible for ensuring that all problems have been attended to). *大河报*, Feb. 2.
- Xinhua 新华社 (2017b) “十八届中央纪律检查委员会向中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会的工作报告” (Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP by the Eighteenth Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the Ministry of Supervision of the CCP). Nov. 29. http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/29/content_5235228.htm.
- XU MENGLONG 徐梦龙 (2018) “上海: 把问题整改作为巡视工作落脚点” (Shanghai: make the rectification of problems the foothold of inspection work). 中央纪委国家监委网站, June 14. https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/201806/t20180613_173670.html.
- XU MENGLONG (2022) “从数据看高质量发展” (High-quality development from the perspective of data). *中国纪检监察报*, Feb. 28.
- XU YOUCAI 徐友才 (2014) “层层传导压力强化监督震慑” (Strengthening inspections and prevention by pressure transmission level by level). *中国监察* 8: 28.
- YANG JUSHUAI 杨巨帅 and ZHONG XIWEI 钟玺玮 (2019) “湖北直指痛点整治检查考核过多过频过滥——检查看实效 留心最重要” (Hubei: directly overhauling excessive review and assessment and paying attention to effectiveness). *中国纪检监察杂志* 8: 48–49.
- YU ZHEXI 余哲西 and GUO MIAOLAN 郭妙兰 (2019) “直击指尖上的形式主义、官僚主义五大病症” (Aiming at the five major ills of formalism and bureaucratism). *中国纪检监察杂志* 15: 44–45.

- YUAN GANG 袁刚 (2013) “‘尚方宝剑’与民众监督” (The “imperial sword” and supervision by the masses). *领导科学* 9: 45.
- ZHANG GUODONG 张国栋, QIAO ZIXUAN 乔子轩, and SONG QUANHAO 宋全浩 (2020) “削减文山会海难在哪里” (What are the difficulties of cutting down the great number of meetings and paperwork). *中国纪检监察杂志* 14: 4.
- ZHANG KEYONG 张科勇 (2019) “整治文山会海” (Remedying too much paperwork and too many meetings). *中国纪检监察杂志* 15: 54.
- ZHANG SHU 张曙 (2020) “创新打法精准整治形式主义官僚主义” (Method innovation for accurate remediation of formalism and bureaucratism). *中国纪检监察杂志* 1: 56.
- ZHANG XIAOHUA 张晓华 (2004) “中央巡视组: 监督工作任重道远” (Central inspection teams: inspections have much to do and a long way to go). *瞭望新闻周刊* 51: 11–13.
- ZHANG XUEBO 张学博 (2021) “对形式主义、官僚主义的制度治理” (Institutional governance of formalism and bureaucratism). *理论视野* 6: 85–90.
- ZHANG ZHIQIANG 章志强 (2019) “低质量的‘勤’无异于另一种形式主义” (Low-quality “diligence” is nothing less than a kind of formalism). *中国纪检监察杂志* 11: 46–47.
- ZHAO BING 赵兵 (2018) “新时代巡视利剑作用更加彰显——十九届中央第一轮巡视工作综述” (The sword of inspection plays an increasing important role in the new era: a summary of the first round of inspection carried out by the Nineteenth Central Committee of the CCP). *人民日报*, Aug. 1.
- ZHAO CHENGFEI 赵成斐 (2017) “新时期《中国共产党巡视工作条例》的修改、创新及价值意义” (Modification, innovation and value of the “Regulations on the CCP’s Inspection Work” in the new era). *党政研究* 6: 68–72.
- ZHAO ZHENYU 赵振宇 (2020) “利剑出鞘显锋芒” (The sword of inspection drawn with a shining edge). *中国纪检监察杂志* 1: 22–23.
- ZHOU ENLAI 周恩来 (2013 [1963]) “官僚主义的二十种表现” (Twenty manifestations of bureaucratism). *党的生活* 10: 6.
- ZHOU GENSHAN 周根山 (2018) “中央纪委办公厅印发工作意见: 集中整治形式主义官僚主义 重点整治四个方面12类突出问题” (Statement issued by the General Office of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: focus on overhauling formalism and bureaucratism with emphasis on twelve types of salient questions in four categories). *中国纪检监察报*, Sept. 25.
- ZHOU WEIWEI 周维维 (2021) “清理层层加码: 切实为基层减负” (Cleaning up adding even more to the called-for quotas and actually reducing the burden on grassroots officials). *中国纪检监察杂志* 15: 45.

Author Biography

Zhengyang Jiang 蒋正阳 is a postdoctoral fellow of TIAS, Tsinghua University. She received her PhD from Renmin University of China. Her research interests are China’s legal history, legal sociology, and legal culture.