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## The Characteristics of China Secretary Corruption: a Case Study

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### Abstract:

*In contrast to the other kinds of official corruption, the secretary corruption is more concealed, as the secretary position downplays in most of the situations. Secretary position is also regarded as the cradle of the future higher officials tacitly, so the secretary corruption has more serious and profound influence on China regime. The paper set out to analyze the secretary corruption with Li Zhen's case as the example. The paper intends to discuss secretary corruption in the perspective of guanxi, a common phenomenon in unique China social condition. The paper concludes that the secretary corruption's reasons are similar to the reasons for other kinds of official corruptions. However, the secretary position, as the position beside the senior, is unique and can get the informal power easily, so the corrupted secretary can make rent-seeking for his/her informal power, although the secretary is stipulated to have no so much official power. The guanxi net beside the secretary is more obscure, but it does not mean the secretary corruption is less adverse. On the contrary, the secretary corruption would be more serious because of the ubiquitousness and obscurity of secretary position in China society.*

**Keywords:** Secretary corruption, Guanxi, rent-seeking, informal power, Renqing

### 1. Introduction

Corruption is the unintended byproduct of the fast economic development since 1980s. With the opaque society, the secretary beside the leader would make use of his/her position beside the leader to seek the economic benefit, sexual favor and promotion. (Gong, Ting. 1994). The secretary corruption discovered in China increased in recent years. It attracts the notices of the public, because such corruption is not obvious, or even hidden, and on the other hand, the secretary position in China has always being the cradle for cultivate the future cadres, for example, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai have been the secretaries. However, the results of secretary corruption in China is serious, because the secretary's role is so ubiquitous that almost every school, work unit, government of different levels, company or even the army has the secretary(Li W, Pye L W. 1992). So the secretary corruption would cause the drastic destruction to China society and politics.

Many Chinese scholar points out that the secretary corruption is caused by the degenerated morality of the secretary (e.g. Lu Shaofeng, Yan Feng. 2015; Wang Zibo2011). There are also some researchers regarded that the secretary corruption should be caused by the ineffectiveness of the legal implementation (Shen Heqing,2008). Such assertions noticed the legal and moral factors of the secretary corruption, however, only the legal and moral factors cannot delete the corruption, because the secretary corruption is also caused by some other factors.

If one wants to understand the cause of the secretary corruption, he or she should survey the circumstance that nurture the corruption, but not only notice the secretary's morality and the legal measures to counteract it. Based on the analysis above, the paper proposes the following hypothesis:

- H1: The secretary corruption is mainly caused by the official circumstance.
- H2: The intimate relationship between the secretary and leader is critical to the secretary corruption.

### 2. Methodology

#### 2.1. The Choice of Li Zhen's Case as the Analysis Object

There are numerous cases of secretary corruption in China, so it is infeasible to investigate all the cases in this paper. One of the typical case about secretary corruption is Li Zhen's Corruption. Li Zhen, who was called as the first secretary in Hebei province, was executed on November 13, 2003. He had been the secretary of Cheng Weigao, the secretary of Hebei Province party committee<sup>1</sup>. He was once the ordinary teacher, then became the cadre. After he became the secretary of Cheng Weigao, he was promoted frequently during his official career. At last, he was appointed to be the director general of taxation bureau in 1997 and the reserve cadre of

<sup>1</sup> The secretary of Hebei Province party committee is the most powerful leader in Hebei province, but not the secretary who works in the office and beside the leader to serve.

national taxation bureau and provincial people's government. In 2000, he was double designated and then arrested for corruption. In 2003, he was sentenced to death.

The life trajectory of Li Zhen is typical about the secretary corruption, as he began his career as a middle school teacher, then became the ordinary cadre and the secretary of high rank officials. The intimate relationship of him with the leader enable him have the power to corrupt and then be promoted to high rank. So it is meaningful to analyze Li Zhen's case to recognize the cause of the secretary corruption. So Li Zhen's case can be used as the typical one to analyze the secretary corruption.

### *2.2. Guanxi as the Most Important Concept to Describe the Working Environment of Secretary*

What is the most important factor in the secretary corruption remains controversial. However, since the secretary's work is mainly about the service for the leader, the corruption would have some relation with the secretary's connection with leader. It is reasonable to assume that the working environment facilitates the secretary corruption. The special working environment may be characterized by providing the power for the secretary to corrupt. According to Feng Shizheng (2003), the secretary pursues the profit by the rent-seeking, as he or she is empowered by the leader.

Among the concepts that describe the relationship between the secretary and leader, *guanxi* (connection) is one suitable concept. *Guanxi* is a concept of Chinese culture, which is totally different from that of the western world. *Guanxi* means not only the connection or relationship, but also one kind of special dependence on each other. In the case of the secretary and leader, *guanxi* means that the secretary and leader depend on each other. *Guanxi* is important in Chinese society, that is, *guanxi* influences every sort of business deeply. For example, the companies should keep the good *guanxi* with the government in order to get the well development (Xin K R, Pearce J L. 1996). *Guanxi* is also extremely important in the official circle.

### *2.3. The Main Sections of the Paper*

In the following sections, the paper will describe the life trajectory of Li Zhen and analyze the typical characters of the trajectory. In the next section, the paper will analyze the *guanxi* between Li Zhen and his leader. The following section will discuss the rent-seeking of Li Zhen. Then the paper will discuss such common phenomenon in secretary corruption theoretically.

## **3. The Typical Characteristics of Li Zhen's Life Trajectory**

With the time passing, more details about Li Zhen's case are exposed. In 2003, Li Zhen's case is the sensational press in China media. He was the one who got the almost the fastest promotion in that times but soon sentenced to death.

Li Zhen was born into an ordinary cadre family in 1962 in Zhangjiakou city of Hebei province. After graduating from a normal university, He was distributed to a farm as a teacher. However, he was not satisfied to be an ordinary teacher, so from 1983, he managed to work in Zhangjiakou Radio Factory, Electron Institution and Municipal Audit and Economy Committee with the statuses as the staff and cadre. In 1986, he was ordered to work in one oil factory as an ordinary staff. In 1988, he came to Beijing and worked for a retired leader with the identity of a servant in the National Organs Services Bureau (Renminribao, 2014). It can be said that the experience of being the servant of the retired leader changed his life. Before he went to work in Beijing, one retired leader travelled in Zhangjiakou, where he had fought in the war period, but he soon got ill. Li Zhen is assigned to take care of the retired leader. During that time, Li Zhen's careful concern for the leader earned the trust and favorable impression of the leader. After serving for the leader for several months, the leader asked Li Zhen what he would like to do. Li Zhen said that he wanted to work in Beijing. The leader suggested Li Zhen should work in Zhangjiakou city. Then Li Zhen got one position in Hebei Province Government as the identity of an ordinary civil servant with the help of the leader (Min Yizong, 2002). "Without the considerable *guanxi* (connection), Li Zhen could not be transferred from an ordinary cadre in an ordinary grassroots institution to the civil servant position in province government, because that is not the ordinary transfer." (Min Yizong, Mu Yi.2002). From the above-mentioned experience of Li Zhen, we would find that *guanxi* is extremely important. Without *guanxi*, Li Zhen would not have been promoted.

In 1990, Li Zhen became the secretary of one vice-governor of Hebei province. In 1992, he became the secretary of governor and in 1993, the secretary of the Hebei province Party committee secretary. Hebei province party committee secretary is not the secretary who service the leader, but the No. 1 leader of Hebei province. In other words, Li Zhen became more and more with the center of Hebei province administration power. In 1997, Li Zhen became the director general of taxation bureau of Hebei province. From 1990 to 1997, Li Zhen was promoted fast. In the process, the *guanxi* played the critical role again.

But in 2000, Li Zhen was soon claimed to be double designated. From 2000 to 2002, he was investigated and interrogated. In 2002, he was convicted and sentenced to death. In 2003, he was executed. In other words, from 2000 to 2003, he failed soon. So we would find that Li Zhen rose fast and failed soon. When he died, he was only 41 years old. So his life was tragic to some extent.

Among the cause of the tragedy, the pursuit for power was the critical factor. From 1990, he became close to the power center of Hebei province, so he was promoted to fast. But because of his too much conceit in politics, he corrupted soon and the corruption was soon discovered, then he was sentenced to death soon. His official career was just like the comet flied from the sky.

The fast promotion of Li Zhen is because that he is close to the power center with the identity of secretary of the leaders who had the power. The secretary position in government is seriously important, because the secretary would have more power resource, compared to the other positions. Although the secretary is stipulated that he or she would not have much power and should not infringe on the stipulations by interfering with the political decision. Nevertheless the secretary would have more power resource because that he or she is close to the power center. So Li Zhen was promoted soon and had the corresponding power resource to corrupt. Compared to other officials, Li Zhen was promoted faster with the help of the leader he served. In China official circle, the secretary would get the promotion more easily (Zou Yanqiu. 2014).

According to the stipulations of Central Government of China, only the vice-ministerial officials or above can have the secretaries. However, almost the officials of township leaders would have the full-time secretaries (Zou Yanqiu. 2014). There are numerous secretaries in China. Commonly, the secretaries would get the easier promotion. Some researchers even regarded the secretary position as the cradle of the high rank officials (e.g. Xun Lei.2013.). Since there are numerous secretaries in China government, there are numerous officials are promoted from the secretary positions. Of course, the secretary corruption or the corruption of officials who are promoted from the secretary position still are popular. Except for Li Zhen's case, there are other similar cases such as the corruption of Qinyu, who was once the secretary of Shanghai municipal party committee secretary, the No. 1 leader of Shanghai. Qinyu was promoted to be the director of Shanghai Baoshan District. But he was discovered to be corrupted and convicted.

The fast rise and the prompt fail of Li Zhen exemplifies the corrupted secretaries' life trajectory. Through getting close to the power center, Li Zhen got the prompt promotion. In fact, when he served the retired leader came from Beijing, he was close to the power. With the recommendation of the retired leader, Li Zhen was promoted to the Hebei province government. After that, he was close to the power center of Hebei province, so in the following years, he is promoted soon. On the other hand, Li Zhen's leader was Cheng Weigao when Li Zhen was the secretary in Hebei province. Cheng Weigao was also No. 1 leader of Hebei province, the Hebei province party committee secretary. Cheng was found to be corrupted in 2003, when the time around the investigation and execution of Li Zhen. The corruption of the secretary and the leader he or she serves would be discovered in the same time, which is the common characteristic of the secretary corruption. There would also some other cases that the both corruptions of secretaries and the corresponding leaders were found, for example, the corruptions of Chen Liangyu and his former secretary Qin Yu.

#### 4. Guanxi between Li Zhen and his Leader

The paper gives the description of the life trajectory of Li Zhen, especially his official career, and the simultaneous corruptions of both he and his leader. From the promotion and corruption of Li Zhen, we would find that guanxi is critical. A discussion of the guanxi in the secretary work will be introduced in this section.

Li Zhen kept the special guanxi with Cheng Weigao when he was the secretary of Cheng Weigao. "Strictly speaking, the corruption of Li Zhen began promptly as he became the secretary of Cheng Weigao." (Liu Tianming, 2006). So here guanxi became the critical factor in Li Zhen's promotion. The guanxi will inevitably combined with renqing (the special affection between the individuals), which will be derived from the cooperation between the secretary and leader.

Traditionally, China society is ruled by the guanxi and renqing. Traditional society of China is the acquaintance society, relying on the natural resource in the enclosed environment and the self-sufficient agricultural production (Kang Zhiliang, Wang Shangyin. 2012). The motivations of renqing and guanxi can be divided into three kinds: 1) the retribution to the beneficence; 2) the special relationship; and 3) the willing to do goodness (Kang Zhiliang, Wang Shangyin. 2012). Although modernization of China has changed some spheres in China, however, the renqing and guanxi still exist in individual social relationship, especially in the official circle. The renqing and guanxi bring about not only the negative influence on society in that they would infringe on the law and stipulations, but also the positive effect for society in that they would reduce the cost of the human relationship.

Through the renqing and guanxi between the secretary and leader, the public matter would be changed into the private matter. The renqing and guanxi would trespass about the law and governmental stipulations, which are the public matters. In the working environment of secretary, the connection between the leader and secretary would not be confined within the public sphere, but also the private sphere. Even for most of the time, for secretary, it cannot discern the public matter or private matter. For example, the relatives of the leader, especially the wife of the leader, would interfere with the politics (Wang Huaizhi, Guo Zheng. 2012). So the secretary should cope with the relationship with the relatives of the leader carefully, and get along with them, in order to fulfil his or her intention. In the daily communication with the leader, the secretary should keep the dignity of leader, for example, the secretary should not flap the shoulder of the leader, or point to the leader with finger (Wang Huaizhi, Guo Zheng. 2012). That is easily to be understood that the salary, housing and other benefits are determined by the leader who the secretary served. So the relationship between the secretary and the leader would have many factors about the private. Therefore, the public matters between them would easily be transformed into the private matter.

The results of the transform are possibly the infringement of law and the corruption. Once the private matter is transformed into the private matter, the interpersonal affection, guanxi and renqing would interfere with the normal function of the administration. In the case of Li Zhen, he served the retired leader from Beijing earned him with the transferring to Hebei province government. In the process, the guanxi and renqing played an important role, because normally, the transferring of a person without enough qualification such as Li Zhen cannot be transferred from an ordinary position in a grassroots government to the province government.

The renqing and guanxi between Li Zhen and Cheng Weigao still critical to Li Zhen's promotion and corruption. When Li Zhen's corruption was reported to the central government of China and investigated, Cheng Weigao, his leader, began to shield Li Zhen. Li Zhen accepted bribes and made many promises to the bribers that he would give them the promotion. He even arranged his wife emigrated to Singapore with huge money. Stirring up much fury of general public, Li Zhen's corruption was reported to the central government. Cheng Weigao received the message about the report, and soon he wrote letters twice to central government and asserted that his secretary was not corrupted and was framed up. In his second letter, he told the central government that there is no bribes Li Zhen accepted, and as for Li Zhen's wife, he said in that he had seen her many times in Shijiazhuang, but not emigrated to Singapore (Liu Tianming, 2006). But according to the investigation results of the Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Central, the reports of the corruption of Li Zhen were true. Cheng Weigao's effort to shield Li Zhen failed. Cheng Weigao was although reported to be corrupted, and at last, he was expelled from the party and his provincial-level welfare was also cancelled.

The renqing and guanxi also incurred the corruption of Li Zhen. According to the corruption recording of Li Zhen, his corruption happened mainly after 1995, when he had been the secretary of Cheng Weigao. To some extent, Li Zhen and Cheng Weigao had formed the faction and would protect each other in the negative circumstance.

### **5. The Rent-Seeking of Li Zhen**

Since the reform, China experienced the great improvement in economy, however, the corruption became more in the process. Corruption is one of the unintended by-products of China's policy of economic reform (Gong, Ting, 1994). The corrupted officials would make rent-seeking when they get the power.

In Li Zhen's case, when Li Zhen became the secretary of Cheng Weigao, he began to exchange the power with the money, sexual favors and other power. He said to one merchant once: "you need the support of the official power, and I need the economic support. I support you to earn money, and you support me about the official career. My official status become higher increasingly, and you earn more and more money." (Min Yizong, 2002). What Li Zhen said describes the rent-seeking of the corrupted officials.

The rent-seeking make Li Zhen earn lots of money and the sexual favors. According to the written judgement, Li Zhen accepted the money and other property accounted to 8.14 million yuan (Renminbi ribao, 2003). Li Zhen had also some mistresses because of his power. But, his mistresses betrayed him during the investigation.

Li Zhen's boldness of rent-seeking came from the backing of his boss, Cheng Weigao. As a secretary, Li Zhen had no so much power according to the stipulations. During the routine work and daily life of Li Zhen, he and Cheng Weigao's collaboration derived the critical trust. In other words, Li Zhen's power came from Cheng Weigao. That is the general situation of the corrupted secretary. Cheng Weigao had worked as the party leader at the Nanjing Second Construction Company, based in Nanjing (Lollar, Xia L, Hamilton, et al. 2010). When Li Zhen became the secretary of Cheng Weigao, he accepted the huge bribes from this company, by which the company was awarded many construction contracts. It would find that Li Zhen exchanged the power came from Cheng Weigao for economic profit. Besides, he involved in the decisions about the promotion and appointment for over one hundred times at the provincial or local levels (Lollar, Xia L, Hamilton, et al. 2010). In order to build personal network (guanxi wang) with Li Zhen, the bribers gave Li Zhen and his relatives and wife for any excuse, for example, going overseas, birthday ect.

For all the bribes and economic enrichment of Li Zhen, Cheng Weigao is the one who empowered Li Zhen. Without Cheng Weigao's backing, Li Zhen would not have the power and guanxi. In other words, as an ordinary secretary, Li Zhen could not have the power according to the stipulations of the party. However, that did not mean that Li Zhen could not gain the power from other situation.

### **6. The Origins of Secretary Corruption in the Official Circle**

Although China government has tried to hit corruption ever since the foundation of PRC, the corruption has become more with the reform in 1980s. Secretary, as one special group, is found corrupted easily in recent years. Compared to the corruption in other positions, secretary corruption is hidden and obscure, because secretary position is stipulated as the position which function is mainly about serving the leader. In most of the circumstances, secretary would downplay his or her identity, so the secretary's activities are unnoticeable in most of the cases. Nevertheless, there are numerous of secretary positions in all sorts of units, so the corruptions of secretaries would harm the regime seriously. The corruption of secretary cannot be easily be erased according to the data in recent years. Many factors cause the situation.

The first factor is the lack of one independent investigation system. Just as Melanie Manion (1996) believed that the discipline inspection system was designed to check corruption, however, it has routinely keep the official crime out of the justice system (Manion M.1997). Things are somewhat different in recent years, after Xi came to power, the anti-corruption measures are more violent and the discipline inspection system is more independent. During the anti-corruption movement, many secretary corruptions are discovered.

The second reason for the difficulty to avoid the secretary corruption is that the special guanxi between secretary and leader. The guanxi between the secretary and leader not only involves the routine works but also the sentiments. Through the guanxi, the secretary and leader trust each other more and sometimes they would corrupt together and protect each other in the corruption.

The weak punishment for the corruption also contributes to secretary corruption. Researchers at Renmin University in China estimated that only 4 per cent of corruption of officials get caught (Lollar, Xia L, Hamilton, et al. 2010). The average length of time is still not enough according to the same report (Lollar, Xia L, Hamilton, et al. 2010). In such condition, the secretary would not be afraid of the retribution for the corruption, not to say that the corruption of him would not be discovered easily. Li Zhen's corruption was discovered in that he was too unscrupulous and arrogant, which is not common in the secretary group.

The corruption of secretary is rooted in China culture to some extent, so in the situation, the secretary's corruption is inevitable, that is the secretary corruption is among the whole government corruption in China. For the cultural root of the corruption, the legal system of anti-corruption cannot function smoothly. Among those cultural factors, guanxi is the prominent one. Guanxi is not adverse for society generally, on the contrary, guanxi is benign. Guanxi not only exists in China, but also exists in the western world. However, in the condition that the society and government are opaque, the guanxi is adverse. In the transparent society, the guanxi would not be the aid for corruption and adverse to society. The secretary's work is outside of the horizon of society, that is the secretary work is more opaque than many other officials. So the guanxi of the secretary would play more important role in the corruption. Although Li Zhen is only the secretary, whose power seemed limited, his function was realized by many bribers. The public would not perceive Li Zhen's corruption easily, for his unobvious identity in the opaque political function. Until he became the director general of taxation bureau in 1997, his corruption was not detected easily.

One important issue of the secretary's corruption is that such corruption is derived from the informal power, which mainly comes from guanxi. Informal power is the power which is stipulated and recognized officially, on the contrary, informal power is mainly about the power that comes from the recognition of the senior leader. In fact, much power of the secretary would come from the senior leader, including the promotion, for example, the promotion of the secretary to a higher position would be decided by the senior leader alone (Tsai W H, Dean N. 2015). In 2010, the CCP ruled that the promotion of the secretary to a new official position must be subjected to the decision of the supervising organization department, rather than the decision of the leader alone ("Dangzheng lingdao ganbu xuanba renyong gongzuo youguan shixiang baogao banfa(shixing)" (Reporting Practice on Matters Relating to the Selection and Appointment of Party and Government Leading Cadres[piot version], 2013)), unfortunately, the enforcement of such stipulation seemed could not be conceivable(Tsai W H, Dean N. 2015).

## 7. Conclusion

With the fast development of China economy since the reform of China in 1980s, the corruption, as the unintended byproduct, increased. The secretary corruption, which is unnoticeable and hidden in most of the situation, appeared. Because of the characteristic of the secretary corruption, the secretary corruption could not be addressed enough. Nevertheless, there are numerous secretaries in all kinds of the companies, governments, schools, armies and organizations in China, the corruption of the secretary would damage the regime a lot. In the case of the corruption of Li Zhen, it would find that the corruption of Li Zhen is mainly relied on the power comes from his senior leader, which is a kind of informal power. In the process of seeking informal power, guanxi become the main measure. As the common phenomenon in both the western world and China, guanxi plays the different functions in the different social situation. When the social situation is opaque, the guanxi would play as the procurer of the corruption. While when the social situation is transparent, the guanxi is the common and benign phenomenon. By the guanxi with the leader, Li Zhen obtained much informal power, he began to make the rent-seeking, therefore the corruption happened.

The corruption of secretary happens for many reasons. Clearly, the reasons of secretary corruption are similar to the reasons for the other official corruption, for example, the lack of independence of the discipline inspection organization, the guanxi culture in the opaque society, the effect of the faster economic development. But the corruptions of the secretary has some special characteristics due to the unique condition of secretary. Compared to the other kinds of corruptions, secretary corruption comes mainly from the informal power which is entitled by his/her senior leader. In the guanxi net interwoven by the secretary, such informal power is distributed again and becomes the measure of the rent-seeking of the secretary. Because the secretary position is regarded as the cradle of the future higher officials, the secretary corruption would more seriously adverse influences in the future. Secretary corruption, as a social malady, becomes more serious in recent years with the development of economy. It can be decreased only when the society becomes more transparent, for the secretary position downplays in most of the situations, and the secretary corruption is more concealed than many other kinds of official corruptions. Hereby, the two hypotheses mentioned above in the paper are proved. The secretary corruption is mainly caused by the circumstance, and the guanxi between the leader and secretary entitles the secretary with the informal power, which leads to possible corruption.

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