Research Report

Bureaucratic Shirking in China: Is Sanction-based Accountability a Cure?

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Abstract

This study analyses the intricate relationship between sanction-based accountability and bureaucratic shirking. Drawing on an original survey conducted among Chinese civil servants, it addresses the question of whether sanction-based accountability can effectively regulate the conduct of public officials and provide a cure for bureaucratic shirking. The study identifies the characteristics of shirking behaviour in the Chinese bureaucracy and distinguishes three major patterns: evading responsibility, shifting responsibility and reframing responsibility. The findings indicate that sanction-based accountability may contain some obvious and notorious slacking types of behaviour, such as stalling and inaction, but government officials may distort or reframe their responsibilities to cope with accountability pressure. Empirical evidence suggests that owing to some "strategic" adjustments in bureaucratic behaviour, flagrant shirking is replaced by more subtle ways of blame avoidance, such as playing it safe or fabricating performance information. Sanction-based accountability therefore does not offer a panacea for bureaucratic shirking.

Keywords: shirking; accountability; bureaucratic behaviour; civil servants; corruption; China

Bureaucratic shirking is a severe and notorious problem in governments. It exerts a pernicious impact on effective governance and prohibits governments from developing prompt and necessary responses to public needs. In China, the intensification of the anti-corruption campaign since the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012 has seemingly caused public officials, especially leading cadres, to become risk averse and to shirk responsibilities for fear of making mistakes and being implicated in corruption investigations.[1] The common strategies of bureaucratic shirking include, but are not limited to,

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1 Wang, Peng, and Yan 2019; Ni and Wang 2017.

stalling, idling, buck-passing and playing it safe when carrying out public duties. In recent years, the shirking phenomenon has attracted the attention of China's top leaders, who consider it "another form of corruption."[2] The central government has promulgated many rules and regulations to tighten sanction-based accountability in order to crack down on bureaucratic shirking.

Sanction-based accountability connotes intensive monitoring of bureaucratic behaviour and practices and the application of punishments when performance criteria are not met.[3] The campaign to tighten accountability was first launched by the central government to strengthen disciplinary punishment of leading cadres to inhibit the spread of shirking and undesirable work styles. As the Chinese bureaucratic system is characterized by institutional isomorphism across government levels, accountability and blame are usually transferred quickly downward through the hierarchy.[4] Consequently, sanction-based accountability has become a typical control mechanism for upper-level authorities to regulate lower-level officials down the hierarchical chain of the Chinese bureaucracy. Not only leading cadres but also lower-level civil servants face accountability pressure concerning their public duties.[5] Central surveillance over local officials is carried out by hard steering, close monitoring, intensified inspection and considerable interference, and sanctions take disciplinary or legal forms if behavioural deviations are detected.[6] A growing number of public officials have received disciplinary and/or judicial sanctions for their failure to shoulder responsibilities since 2012. For example, in 2015, 2,537 public officials in Henan province received Party or administrative disciplinary penalties because of shirking.[7] Yunnan province held 2,869 civil servants accountable for their administrative nonfeasance from January to August 2018.[8]

Is sanction-based accountability a cure for bureaucratic shirking? How do public officials respond to increased accountability pressure? We address these questions by drawing on an original survey of bureaucratic shirking conducted among Chinese civil servants in 2019. There is a dearth of studies on the shirking problem in China as a whole and particularly on its causes and characteristics relating to the increasing accountability pressure. This study seeks to fill the gap by making two contributions to the scholarly literature. First, it unpacks the concept of bureaucratic shirking by identifying its major patterns and behavioural correlates. Second, based on empirical findings, the study argues that

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2 See Li Keqiang's speech on 8 October 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-10/09/c_1112750366.htm. Accessed 23 July 2020.

3 Mansbridge 2014; O'Connell 2005.

4 Gong and Xiao 2017.

5 Interviews with grassroots officials in March 2019. In total, 36 officials were interviewed.

6 Schubert and Alpermann 2019.

7 "Henan: zhuanxiang zhili lanzheng daizheng weiguan buwei 2,537 ren beichuli" (Henan province: 2,537 civil servants were punished in a special effort to stop shirking). CCDI official website, 25 March 2016, http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/201603/t20160324_141046.html. Accessed 23 July 2020.

8 "Yonglansanzhe kuai gaobie zuori zhiwo" (Shirkers should turn over a new leaf). *Zhongguo jijian jiancha bao*, 9 October 2018, http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/yaowen/201810/t20181009_180988.html. Accessed 23 July 2020.

intensive monitoring and punishment do not necessarily increase effectiveness and efficiency in government and could in fact have a detrimental effect. Sanction-based accountability deters the most obvious and notorious shirking practices, but public officials may develop coping strategies by engaging in more subtle forms of shirking to protect themselves from being caught.

Bureaucratic Shirking: Patterns and Characteristics

The term "shirking" was originally defined by the management literature as a tendency for workers to supply less effort in work in order to create more leisure time for a given wage.[9] It was then introduced by agency theory to describe public servants who, as rational-economic beings, sought to minimize personal effort and maximize self-interest.[10] Exterior control mechanisms such as monitoring by upper-level authorities to curb bureaucratic shirking at lower levels are thus considered necessary.[11] However, an increasing number of studies take issue with agency theory's account of bureaucrats and instead emphasize bureaucrats' policy preferences and professionalism.[12] John Brehm and Scott Gates, for example, argue that although bureaucrats may minimize the amount of effort they put into work, whether they shirk or work depends more on their preference for a particular policy or on peer pressure than on supervision intensity.[13]

In this study, we define shirking as a bureaucratic behaviour that intentionally minimizes the effort expended in performing public responsibilities to satisfy personal interests. Shirking is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon and takes different forms. To find its patterns and characteristics, we collected 432 shirking cases reported by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) on its website from 2012 to 2019. These cases were identified by searching three terms that have been officially used to describe shirking in China: *buzuowei* 不作为, *weiguan buwei* 为官不为 and *lanzheng* 懒政. The CCDI's website is the most authoritative source reporting shirking cases in China and has regularly publicized cases collected nationwide since 2012. The broad coverage and considerable diversity of the CCDI-reported cases allow us to pinpoint the major patterns of bureaucratic shirking.

Based on a content analysis of the 432 cases, we identify six major types of shirking: buck-passing, bluffing, playing it safe, stalling and inaction, idling, and negligence, which can be further grouped into three core categories, namely shifting responsibility, reframing responsibility, and evading responsibility.[14]

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9 Jones 1984; Bennett and Naumann 2005.
10 Williamson 1987.
11 Lupia and McCubbins 1994.
12 Pierre and Peters 2017.
13 Brehm and Gates 1999.
14 Our conceptual framework takes into consideration the Chinese official terminologies – *lanzheng* (lazy in work), *daizheng* (slow in work) and *buzuowei* (inaction) – and is intended for more detailed categorization.

Most of the cases display only one type of strategy. Only a few cases involve two types, and we classify them into both categories.

Shifting responsibility refers to the way in which bureaucrats pass the buck or responsibility to others, such as their colleagues, superiors, subordinates or other departments.[15] It is a typical strategy used by public officials in China to shift workloads or the implementation of unpopular policies to others. The complicated structure of lines-and-blocks (*tiaotiao kuaikuai* 条条块块), with its five-tier hierarchy and fragmentation of functional authority, blurs the boundaries of responsibilities and makes it possible for officials to shift responsibility upwards, downward or horizontally.[16] It is common for higher-level authorities to shift heavy workloads and thorny duties to lower-level officials by forcing them to sign excessive responsibility contracts, thereby placing grassroots officials under tremendous working pressure.[17] However, lower-level officials have also learned to push responsibilities up to higher levels by involving their superiors in tough decision making and by repeatedly reporting their work progress to superiors to avoid making decisions and bearing liability.[18] A widespread tacit practice of passing the buck involves making whoever signs a document responsible for what happens in relation to it afterwards (*shei qianming shei fuze* 谁签名,谁负责). As a result, "smart" officials often avoid signing documents or try to obtain multiple signatures on a document to blur and disperse responsibility.[19]

Reframing responsibility refers to the way in which bureaucrats distort their responsibilities to make them less stressful and risky or easier to implement. Typically, such bureaucrats employ two different strategies: playing it safe and bluffing. Scholars believe that the recently imposed strict surveillance of local officials and stringent punishments for their administrative errors are creating a risky political environment in China.[20] Intensified anti-corruption enforcement has shifted the mentality of many Chinese officials from credit seeking to blame avoidance. To play it safe, for example, some officials try to stay away from innovative and risky tasks, and others simply follow common practices wherever possible to avoid making mistakes, or else they rigidify regulations to hide behind rules. But still some officials try to bluff their way out of accountability pressure. They play tricks to create a false image of success in meeting targets and often deal with increased top-down evaluations by beautifying paperwork, making up statistics and exaggerating accomplishments.[21]

Evading responsibility refers to the practice whereby bureaucrats are completely unwilling to shoulder responsibility and flagrantly display their proclivity for inaction by stalling, idling at work or working carelessly. It is suggested that

15 Hood 2002.
16 Lieberthal 1992.
17 Gao 2009.
18 Deng 2020.
19 Interviews with officials in March 2019.
20 Wang, Peng, and Yan 2019.
21 Gao 2015.

Table 1: **Classification of Shirking Behaviour**

Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Code	Cases
Shifting responsibility	Buck-passing	Shifting responsibilities to subordinates	7
		Shifting responsibilities to other departments	7
		Shifting responsibilities to superiors	3
Reframing responsibility	Bluffing	Launching fake or specious projects	3
		Beautifying paperwork or fabricating numbers to present an image of accomplishment	26
	Playing it safe	Aversion to risk and innovation in decision making	5
		Dogmatism and rigidly sticking to regulations regardless of reality	4
Evading responsibility	Stalling and inaction	Slow or no response to public demands	38
		Slow or no implementation of state policies	64
		Slow or no performance in routine duties	107
	Idling	Engaging in nonwork-related activities during working hours	67
		Absenteeism or late arrivals and early departures	25
	Negligence	Failure to take proper care of assigned duties	80

employees are more likely to evade responsibility when they believe that they can create more leisure time without facing punishment.[22] Evading responsibility was quite common within the Chinese bureaucracy before 2012, when accountability was relatively lax, and manifested in absenteeism, late arrivals and early departures, and playing cards and mahjong games during work time. Numerous cases of that nature were uncovered and punished after the intensification of accountability.[23] Consequently, such flagrant evasions of responsibility have been significantly reduced. In comparison with the other two types of shirking (shifting responsibility and reframing responsibility), evading responsibility is easier to detect. This explains why the number of officially reported cases of evading responsibility is substantially larger than the numbers of reported cases of shifting and reframing responsibility. Table 1 summarizes the patterns and characteristics of the three types of shirking.

Sanction-based Accountability against Shirking

Accountability is widely considered to be an effective tool to regulate and control administrative behaviour.[24] It refers to a specific social relationship or mechanism that requires public agents to explain and justify their conduct and subjects them to sanctions if poor performance is detected.[25] The concept of

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22 Bennett and Naumann 2005.
23 "Jiuge anli gaosu ni: zhexie qingxing bujie dianhua fei xiaoshi" (Nine cases tell you: failure to answer phone calls is a serious problem under these situations). CCDI official website, 17 August 2018, http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/toutiao/201808/t20180817_177913.html?from=singlemessage. Accessed 23 July 2020.
24 Dubnick 2003.
25 Bovens 2007, 450.

accountability is often related to positive connotation and good governance and is considered a valid measure to ensure that discretionary power is exercised legally and effectively by bureaucrats.[26] Scholars argue that oversight plays an essential role in curbing abuses of power and maintaining the appropriate conduct of public officials, who will comply with work procedures and fulfil their responsibilities more faithfully if they know that they are being closely monitored.[27] Accountability is synonymous with punishment in some governments, where opportunities for equal dialogue between higher-level authorities and subordinates and for reward-based consequences are absent.[28]

In China, sanction-based accountability has been increasingly adopted to regulate public officials since 2012. It is reported that the central government issued or amended more than 50 inner-Party disciplinary regulations in the five years after the 18th National Congress of the CCP.[29] In 2016, two significant regulations on supervision and accountability of public officials were amended. The first, the "Regulations of the Chinese Communist Party on inner-Party supervision (*Zhongguo gongchandang dangnei jiandu tiaoli* 中国共产党党内监督条例), emphasizes the CCP's central leadership in fighting corruption and the centralization of supervision power through the discipline inspection system. The other document, the "Regulations of the Chinese Communist Party on accountability" (*Zhongguo gongchandang wenze tiaoli* 中国共产党问责条例), stipulates that any negligence must be denounced and subject to strict punishment.

Some long-standing control mechanisms, such as public budgeting and auditing, cadre responsibility contracts, inspections, performance appraisals and codes of conduct, have been further strengthened at every level of the government to hold local officials accountable. New mechanisms have also been added. Stationing (*jinzhu* 进驻) and inspection tours (*xuncha* 巡查), for example, have been launched by the CCDI as two major supervision measures to achieve full coverage of top-down inspection across all levels of the government, Party units, state organs, universities and state-owned enterprises.[30] During the five years from 2013 to 2017, the central government conducted 12 rounds of inspections over 277 essential Party organizations.[31]

Local commissions of discipline inspection (CDIs) at each level have also dispatched their own inspection teams or inspectors to monitor the Party and government organs at the same level and lower-level organizations. In interviews with township officials conducted by correspondents of *China Comment* (*Banyuetan* 半月谈), a town Party secretary complained that in 2018 alone, his office spent 200 days on preparing for various inspections from upper-level authorities and accompanying the inspection teams during their checking-up

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26 Brandsma and Schillemans 2013.
27 Bovens 2007.
28 Mansbridge 2014, 55–58.
29 Chen 2017b.
30 Yuen 2014.
31 Chen 2017a.

visits.[32] A township official in an eastern province received more than 50 inspections within six months in 2018.[33] Some local CDIs even regard a higher number of disciplinary sanction cases in their localities as an achievement with which to impress their superiors. The punishment of officials' unsatisfactory performance and misconduct has become increasingly stringent; some penalties are inappropriate and others arbitrary. In one case, an official received a disciplinary penalty for failing to answer a phone call from his supervisor when he was taking a shower at home after working hours.[34] In another case, an education bureau in Hunan province was criticized for allowing its officials to have snacks in the office.[35]

Sanction-based accountability may have adverse effects. An emerging body of studies reveals that it is unrealistic and unfounded to imagine a situation in which bureaucrats only passively respond to external control.[36] Scholars refute the effectiveness of coercive supervision over bureaucrats and instead emphasize the impact of personal preferences and discretionary power on bureaucratic behaviour.[37] It is unlikely that bureaucrats will blindly obey top-down instructions which conflict with their own policy preferences and/or personal interests. Besides preference heterogeneity, bureaucrats' information advantages over their superiors and their substantial discretionary authority also allow them to circumvent control.[38]

In this light, the success of accountability lies with the cooperation, support and actions of civil servants in accountability.[39] Bureaucrats may cope with accountability pressure through certain types of strategic behaviour. Scholars warn about the salience of the accountability paradox – that is, stringent monitoring over bureaucrats' compliance may repel bureaucrats' responsible judgement and moral deliberation.[40] For example, unbearable accountability pressure may motivate bureaucrats to adopt a variety of defensive strategies to deal with the stress and not be caught.[41] Monitoring overloads may create red tape, discourage innovation and lead to risk-averse decision making.[42] In other words, sanction-based accountability is a double-edged sword: it may help to

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32 *China Comment* is affiliated with the CCP Propaganda Department.

33 "Xiangzhen ganbu: lai ducha de ren bi zhua luoshi de haiduo" (Township cadres: more people come to supervise us than to help us with our work). *Banyuetan*, 28 August 2018, http://m.people.cn/n4/2018/0828/c203-11514661.html. Accessed 23 July 2020.

34 "Xizao weijie dianhua beichufen: wenze jiandan cubao yeshi xingshizhuyi" (Disciplinary penalty on failing to answer a phone call when taking a bath: arbitrary accountability also belongs to formalism). *Renmin ribao*, 18 November 2016, https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1643796811362257225&wfr=spider&for=pc. Accessed 23 July 2020.

35 "'Coushu shi wenze' rang jiceng ganbu tangqiang" (Accountability based on "matching the numbers" subjects innocent grassroots cadres to punishment). *Banyuetan*, 14 November 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-11/14/c_1123712282.htm. Accessed 23 July 2020.

36 Meier and O'Toole 2006.

37 Sobol 2016.

38 Lipsky 2010.

39 Wang, Xiaohu 2002.

40 Jos and Tompkins 2004.

41 Ashforth and Lee 1990; Bruijn 2002.

42 Behn 2001.

curb bureaucratic shirking but it can also encourage it under certain circumstances.

Data and Measurement

To show the relationship between sanction-based accountability and bureaucratic shirking, we draw on a large-N original survey among Chinese civil servants. The respondents were full-time public officials enrolled as part-time students in Master of Public Administration (MPA) programmes in universities. We chose MPA students as respondents because doing so allowed us to access a considerable number of civil servants from different government posts and with diverse backgrounds. We also tried to broaden the geographical coverage of the sample by selecting two or three MPA programmes in China's western, central and eastern regions. A total of 1,100 anonymous questionnaires were collected, of which 869 were valid. The respondents were from 24 different provinces; 45.5 per cent were male and 54.5 per cent were female.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study is bureaucratic shirking, which consists of the three different types of shirking behaviour mentioned above: evading responsibility, shifting responsibility and reframing responsibility. We used two or three items to gauge respondents' attitudes towards each type of shirking. The purpose was to measure respondents' perceptions of bureaucratic shirking rather than their actual engagement in it. The sensitivity of the questionnaire was therefore reduced. A five-point Likert scale was adopted for each item, with 1 being "completely disagree" and 5 being "completely agree," and a higher score indicating a stronger propensity towards shirking. The measurement items and the scale's validity and reliability are presented in the Appendix and Appendix Table 1.

Explanatory variable

The independent variable, sanction-based accountability, is measured by six items that reflect the monitoring and punishment intensity imposed by superiors. An exploratory factor analysis of the six items presented in Appendix Table 2 shows that they can be aggregated into two major factors. Factor 1 reflects the intensity of monitoring, guaging whether respondents perceive their superiors' supervision as being very strict. Factor 2 demonstrates the severity of punitive consequences, measuring whether and to what extent respondents consider that they may be punished if they perform poorly. We also performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the two factors. The CFA model fits well (CFI = .997, TLI = .994, RMSEA = .027, PCLOSE = .892, SRMR = .019), and all factor loadings are significant. For the explanatory variable, we also used a five-point Likert scale in which a higher score indicates a higher level of monitoring intensity and more stringent punishment.

Control variables

Other confounding variables that may influence the dependent variable are included as controls. First, responsibility clarity is controlled for because it gives actors in the accountability chain a clear sense of who has what responsibilities, how and why, so that shirking can be prevented. For that purpose, the survey included such questions as whether respondents consider their responsibilities to be clearly defined. Second, resource constraint, referring to the shortage of manpower and material support for bureaucrats, is also controlled for because civil servants may feel particularly stressed and are more likely to reframe responsibilities if they lack sufficient resources to fulfil them.[43] A third control variable is public service motivation (PSM), which follows James Perry's measurement scale.[44] Scholars believe that PSM exerts strong positive effects on organizational performance by promoting a sense of citizenship and a high level of job involvement among civil servants.[45] Peer pressure, which is measured by whether colleagues are working hard, is also controlled for because bureaucrats interact with and learn from each other in an organization, and their solidary preference is a major factor influencing their decision on whether they should work or shirk.[46]

All the four major control variables are gauged by a five-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater responsibility clarity, more severe resource constraint, higher PSM, and stronger peer influence to work hard. Basic demographic variables are also controlled for, including gender and age, as well as other variables such as administrative rank and monthly income.[47]

Analysis and Results

Descriptive statistics of all the variables are reported in Table 2. The results suggest that the respondents' propensity to evade and shift responsibility is not strong, with average values being 2.11 and 2.82, respectively. Nevertheless, the likelihood for reframing responsibility is higher, with an average value of 3.66; 71.6 per cent of the respondents have a score higher than 3, the neutral point. The average values for monitoring intensity and punishment intensity are 3.75 and 3.51, respectively, indicating that sanction-based accountability imposed by superiors is rather strong.

The results of the multiple linear regression analysis of the three types of shirking are reported in Table 3. The variance inflation factor (VIF) of each variable

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43 Hupe and Buffat 2014; Lipsky 2010.
44 Perry 1996.
45 Pandey, Wright and Moynihan 2008.
46 Brehm and Gates 1999.
47 Gender is coded as male = 0, female = 1; age is measured across six levels ("≤30" = 1, "31–35" = 2, "36–40" = 3, "41–45" = 4, "46–50" = 5, and ">50" = 6); administrative rank is treated as an ordinal variable with six levels (section staff = 1, deputy-section grade = 2, section grade = 3, deputy-division grade = 4, division grade = 5, and deputy-bureau grade or above = 6); and monthly income is coded as an ordinal variable with 5 scales ("≤5,000¥" = 1, "5,001–7,500¥" = 2, "7,501–10,000¥" = 3, "10,001–12,500¥" = 4, ">12,500¥" = 5).

Table 2: **Descriptive Statistics of Variables**

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Bureaucratic shirking					
Evading responsibility	856	2.11	0.86	1	5
Shifting responsibility	855	2.82	0.98	1	5
Reframing responsibility	855	3.66	0.75	1	5
Sanction-based accountability					
Monitoring intensity	859	3.75	0.81	1	5
Punishment intensity	855	3.51	0.83	1	5
Control variables					
Responsibility clarity	855	3.01	1.07	1	5
Resources constraint	861	2.91	1.07	1	5
Public service motivation	857	3.87	0.84	1	5
Peer pressure	855	3.53	0.99	1	5
Gender (male = 0)	867	0.54	0.50	0	1
Age	866	1.61	1.01	1	6
Administrative rank	859	1.66	1.26	1	6
Monthly income	862	2.38	1.16	1	5

in the six models is much lower than the usual diagnosis criterion (10), demonstrating that there are no multicollinearity problems in these models. Models 1, 3 and 5 include only control variables, such as gender, age, administrative rank, monthly income, responsibility clarity and resource constraint, while independent variables are introduced in Models 2, 4 and 6. To account for all unobserved time-invariant province-level confounders, province fixed effects are included in all models.

The results show that sanction-based accountability exerts different impacts on the three types of shirking behaviour. Monitoring intensity is negatively related to evading responsibility ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$) in Model 2, but it has a positive impact on reframing responsibility ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) in Model 6. The effects of punishment intensity move in the same direction as those of monitoring intensity. Specifically, punishment intensity shows a significant negative correlation with evading responsibility ($\beta = -0.12$, $p < 0.01$) but has a positive relationship with reframing responsibility ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, the greater the respondents perceive monitoring and punishment intensity to be, the less likely they are to evade responsibility, but the more likely they are to reframe responsibility. This suggests that intensive sanction-based accountability may deter bureaucrats from evading responsibility, which is the more obvious and flagrant type of shirking, but it may induce some more subtle shirking strategies, such as reframing responsibility, to enable bureaucrats to cope with accountability pressure. The effects of monitoring and punishment intensity on shifting responsibility (namely, buck-passing) yield no statistical significance. This may be because although officials attempt to shift thorny responsibilities to others when facing stringent accountability, it is practically difficult to do as other officials would also avoid becoming scapegoats.

Table 3: **Regression Results of Three Types of Shirking**

	Evade Responsibility		Shift Responsibility		Reframe Responsibility	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Control variables						
Gender	-0.11*	-0.12**	0.04	0.04	-0.02	-0.00
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Age[1]	0.03	0.02	0.16**	0.17**	0.12**	0.14**
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Administrative rank	0.00	0.00	-0.06*	-0.06*	-0.01	-0.01
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Monthly income	0.04	0.04	0.09**	0.09**	0.05*	0.05*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
PSM	-0.24***	-0.21***	-0.27***	-0.28***	0.01	-0.04
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Peer pressure	-0.12***	-0.10***	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.05*	-0.08***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Responsibility clarity	-0.10***	-0.12***	-0.19***	-0.18***	-0.20***	-0.16***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Resource constraint	-0.06**	-0.04	0.08**	0.08**	0.12***	0.09***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Sanction-based accountability						
Monitor intensity		-0.10**		0.10		0.16***
		(0.05)		(0.07)		(0.04)
Punishment intensity		-0.12***		-0.06		0.11***
		(0.04)		(0.05)		(0.03)
Province fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adj R-squared	0.11	0.15	0.17	0.16	0.18	0.22

Notes:
[1]Age is recoded as a dummy variable in the regression model ("≤30" = 0, ">30" = 1). Standard errors in parentheses; *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

The regression results in Table 3 show some interesting effects of the control variables. Age, responsibility clarity, peer pressure, resource constraint and PSM have significant impacts on the propensity for shirking. Respondents over 30 years of age are more likely to shift responsibility and to reframe responsibility than those under 30. A possible reason for this is that as their work experience increases, officials may know how to deal with work pressures better by implementing various intricate strategies. Furthermore, responsibility clarity is negatively related to all three types of shirking behaviour, indicating that when responsibilities are clearly stated and assigned, it is more difficult for officials to shirk their duties by distorting them or shifting them to others. If responsibilities remain obscure, sanction-based accountability can only cause more buckpassing or playing it safe to avoid being blamed. Peer pressure is also negatively associated with the three types of shirking, demonstrating that if other colleagues are all dedicated to working, it is less likely for one to shirk his or her responsibility. Resource constraint shows a positive correlation with shifting responsibility and reframing responsibility. Hence, without an adequate supply of

work-related resources, officials are more likely to shift workloads to others or distort tasks to make them easier to implement. PSM presents a negative association with evading responsibility and shifting responsibility. This means that bureaucrats with higher prosocial values are less inclined to be sloppy and inactive or to pass the buck to others.

Conclusion

This study addresses the underexplored question of whether sanction-based accountability can reduce bureaucratic shirking and serve as an effective cure for official malfeasance and nonfeasance. In the scholarly literature, the concept of accountability is often positively associated with the appropriate exercise of discretionary power.[48] Sanction-based accountability, in particular, is expected to play a significant role in promoting strict compliance among bureaucrats and in preventing them from shirking responsibilities. This study argues against this expectation. It first provides a nuanced picture of bureaucratic shirking by disaggregating it into three types: evading responsibility, shifting responsibility and reframing responsibility. This is followed by an examination of the impact of sanction-based accountability on each of the three types of shirking.

The findings reveal that intensified monitoring and severe punishment may deter bureaucrats from blatantly evading responsibility but may also induce more subtle types of shirking, such as reframing responsibility. Specifically, under heavy accountability pressure, bureaucrats may move away from conventional shirking behaviour, such as being sloppy, inactive or idle at work and slacking off. They may instead engage in more covert shirking activities. Some may avoid making innovations or changes in order to play it safe; others may fabricate an image of success in fulfilling their responsibilities in order to disguise their irresponsible behaviour. Thus, the intensification of sanction-based accountability may have a deterrent effect on some types of shirking but not on others. It may prevent bureaucrats from flagrantly evading responsibilities and stop abuses of power to some degree, but accountability pressure does not necessarily raise bureaucrats' responsibility awareness; they may respond negatively by developing coping strategies.

The Chinese government has become aware of the potential problems of sanction-based accountability in recent years. In 2016, it called for the establishment of "fault-tolerance mechanisms" (*rongcuo jizhi* 容错机制) and incentive mechanisms to encourage reformers and innovators to put more effort into their work, show initiative and strive towards achievements.[49] The frequency of top-down inspections and assessments of local work has decreased since the central government issued its "Circular on the coordination of inspection, checking

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48 Brandsma and Schillemans 2013.
49 "Zhengfu gongzuo baogao" (Report on the work of the government). *Beijing Review*, 16 March 2016, http://www.beijingreview.com.cn/special/2016/2016lh/lhwj/201603/t20160316_800052437.html. Accessed 23 July 2020.

and assessment work" (*Guanyu tongchou guifan ducha jiancha kaohe gongzuo de tongzhi* 关于统筹规范督查检查考核工作的通知) in August 2018. However, accountability pressure within the Chinese bureaucracy will not disappear overnight: it takes time to institutionalize fault-tolerance mechanisms and to ensure their effective implementation.

Our study contributes to a better understanding of the complex patterns and causes of bureaucratic shirking in China. It illustrates that sanction-based accountability is by no means a panacea for bureaucratic shirking and, indeed, may even backfire by invoking opportunistic behaviour among bureaucrats. The theoretical implications of our findings go beyond China because bureaucratic shirking is a widespread problem for all governments and, as this study finds, it provides a good lens through which bureaucratic motivations and behaviour can be explored. Practically, our analysis of the responses of public officials to sanction-based accountability and of their attitudes towards shirking proves that externally imposed control is not a cure for shirking because it does not induce public officials to develop an inner sense of responsibility. In order to combat bureaucratic shirking, the Chinese government should place more emphasis on promoting a high level of public service motivation, value-based compliance and a strong awareness of public interest among its officials.

Acknowledgements

Conflicts of interest

None.

Biographical notes

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摘要: 本研究探讨了惩处型问责与官僚懒政行为之间的复杂关系。基于对中国公职人员的问卷调查，本文分析了惩处型问责是否能够有效地规范官

僚行为，并降低其懒政行为。本文揭示了中国官僚体系懒政行为的特征，并区分了三种基本模式：回避责任，推诿责任及异化责任。研究结果表明，惩处型问责能够遏制回避责任这类直接忽视和敷衍责任的行为，如拖延和不作为，但却使一些官员通过异化责任这类更隐蔽的方式来规避风险和减轻问责压力。官僚会对其行为进行 "策略性调整"，从直接逃避责任转向更为隐蔽的避责方式。因此，惩处型问责并不是治理官僚懒政行为的灵丹妙药。

关键词: 懒政; 问责; 官僚行为; 公务员; 腐败; 中国

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Appendix

Survey items used to measure shirking propensities

Respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements.

Evading responsibility:

1. It is no big deal to delay tasks for two or three days.

2. It is ok to surf the internet or watch videos occasionally during working hours.
3. One does not have to handle work with great care.

Shifting responsibility:

1. More responsibilities lead to more mistakes, so one should get involved as little as possible.
2. One should avoid risk and give difficult tasks to others.

Reframing responsibility:

1. Well-written reports are more important than well-done jobs.
2. Trophy projects demonstrate good political performance and please superiors.
3. I tend to comply strictly with written rules, even though they are not in line with reality.
4. I stick to routines and do not want to make any change or innovation.

Appendix Table 1: **Reliability and Validity of the Scales of the Three Shirking Types of Behaviour**

Factors	Items Number	Eigenvalue	Cumulative	Cronbach's a
Evading responsibility	3	1.75	65.58%	0.72
Shifting responsibility	2	1.63	81.40%	0.77
Reframing responsibility	4	1.85	61.57%	0.69

Appendix Table 2: **Factor Loading**

Question Items	Factor 1 Loading	Factor 2 Loading
Upper-level departments impose strict supervision over my work	0.733	
I need to report my work to upper-level departments frequently	0.866	
Upper-level departments check and evaluate my work frequently	0.800	
Poor performance will be severely criticized		0.814
The possibility of being punished is very high if I do not perform well		0.870
Punishment is severe enough to deter me		0.746