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Global Corruption and Economic Development: The Experience of China, Japan, and South Korea (2018–2023)

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Abstract: The paper will explore the issue of corruption and economic development by comparing China, Japan and South Korea over the years 2018-2023. Corruption is a very pressing issue of the global agenda, defining the quality of governance, and determining the paths of development long-term. Although the three nations are geographically close to each other, they have a distinctly diverse institutional structure and the anti-corruption strategies, which offer an interesting point of comparison inquiry. The main knowledge gap addressed in the article is that few comparative, time-specific studies have been done regarding the question of how the various models of anti-corruption: authoritarian, democratic-institutional, and hybrid reformist, can translate into economic growth and governance in East Asian countries. The current literature tends to discuss these countries independently or pay attention to individual indicators without considering institutional background and recent changes. The methodology of the study is a qualitative-comparative approach with the descriptive analysis of secondary data. It utilizes the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), government reports, and data of international organizations in order to evaluate the tendencies of corruption level, policy changes and their economic repercussions in the three instances. The results show conflicting growth patterns. The reason corruption is kept very low in Japan is through the deeply rooted democratic institutions and transparency standards. South Korea is showing great progress, which is promoted by the extensive legal reforms, digital governance, and vigorous civic supervision. Through its widespread top-down anti-corruption campaign, China exhibits rather negligible CPI gains which is limited by a poor transparency and institutional accountability. The findings indicate that institutionalized transparency, rule of law and the participation of the people has a stronger correlation with sustainable declines in corruption compared to campaigns that are enforcement-based. The implications of the study are that, good anti-corruption measures, however, are not only mechanisms of governance but also the most important predictors of investment confidence and long-term economic growth, especially to both the emerging and advanced economies.

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1. Introduction

Most of the time the degree of corruption in a country is measured using the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) which is released annually by the Transparency International. The CPI is a measure of the perception of corruption in the government on the range 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean) [1]. Between the years 2018-2023, China, Japan, and South Korea experienced contrasting changes in the CPI scores.

China. Corruption is also still a major issue in China. In 2018, China was ranked 87 th among 180 countries with CPI score of 39 out of 100 [2]. In 2023, the indicator has grown slightly: the CPI score of China was about 42-43 points, which is the seventh decile of the rating (about 76 th place) [3]. That is, China is still a long way behind the developed economies in the integrity of the public governance. In comparison, in 2018 Japan was 18th and the United States 22nd, and China was ranked alongside such countries as Serbia [2]. The low growth of the CPI score in China in the last five years shows that there is not much to be achieved and the perceived corruption level is high.

Japan. Japan has always been one of the countries that are least corrupt. Japan gets 71 points in the CPI (compared to 90 in Denmark, the leading country) and is ranked the 20 th out of 180 countries [4]. However, there was a minor drop and the score reduced by two points as compared to the last year [4]. Altogether, the CPI in Japan has been oscillating in the range of about 70-74 in the last five years which is associated with the high degree of transparency and comparatively low perceived corruption. In the rating of the public-sector integrity, Japan has always been way ahead of the majority of Asian nations and is in the category of clean states with other developed democracies.

South Korea. South Korea has been showing strong performance in terms of CPI over the last five years. It has a score of 59 as of 2019, 61 (2020), 63 (2022) [5]. South Korea scored 63 in 2023, and this is 32nd in the world (22nd among the OECD countries) [5]. This is an improvement of four points in 2019 to 2022 that is a result of effective anti-corruption measures. South Korea continued to increase its score in 2024 (according to CPI data released early in 2025) to 64 and moved up to the 30 th position [6]. South Korea has thus come close to the level of the developed nations but it still has a slight lag with Japan in terms of the indicators of transparency.

It is important to note that stronger ranking in CPI is associated with strong democratic institutions and law. Autocratic regimes have, on average, 30 points on the CPI, and full democracies have an average score of 75 points [2]. In this regard, there is very low level of corruption in Japan and South Korea, democratic states, compared to authoritarian China.

2. Materials and Methods

The research design used in this article is qualitative-comparative because it is based on the systematic study of secondary data and policy documents about the issue of corruption and economic development in China, Japan, and South Korea between the years 2018-2023. The approach to methodology is premised upon the attached file, which has a very broad empirical and analytical background integrating international indices, national legal reforms, and institutional practices. The researchers combine the methods of political economy, institutional analysis, and comparative governance studies to achieve the economic and governance facets of corruption.

The study is based on such fundamental sources of comparative data as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), as published by Transparency International as one of the basic sources, along with the official governmental reports, data by international organizations, and peer-reviewed analytical sources. Instead of considering CPI values as an isolated statistic, the analytical contextualizes them in a wider institutional, legal, and political context, which makes it possible to interpret the trends and country-specific trends in a more subdued manner. The similarities and differences between authoritarian, democratic-institutional, and hybrid anti-corruption models portrayed through the three case studies are identified using the comparative logic.

Qualitative content analysis of legislative reforms, anti-corruption policies, transparency policies and enforcement practices, and interpretative comparison of their perceived economic and governance impacts are analytical procedures. Special emphasis is put on the relationship between anti-corruption policies, transparency mechanisms, and such indicators of economic performance as investment climate and business confidence. The approach is not designed to determine causal relationships via econometric modeling; it rather seeks to determine regular patterns, institutional procedures, and explanatory connection based on the available empirical data.

This method allows to fully evaluate how various models of governance influence the effectiveness and sustainability of anti-corruption policies, as well as to understand structural constraints and outstanding issues that help to discuss the findings and develop the further research directions.

3. Results and Discussion

Impact of Corruption on Economic Growth, Investment, and Business

Corruption has a complex adverse effect on economic growth. It weakens effectiveness of government spending, alters the operation of the market, heightens the expense of conducting business, and lowers investor confidence [2], [2]. There are disturbing reports of these effects, given by international organizations and empirical studies. Corruption costs the world economy no less than USD 2.6 trillion every year according to the estimates of the United Nations, which is approximately 5 percent of the world GDP, and businesses all over the world are paying over USD 1 trillion each year in bribes [2]. These huge numbers represent the immediate loss due to the corruption through embezzlement, misappropriation of the state funds, tax evasion and other illegal activities. The corruption would deter investors. Studies have found out that the higher the score of a country in CPI (i.e. lower the extent of corruption), the higher the levels of foreign direct investment. On the other hand, corruption is also on the increase and this is linked to less inflow of capital and technology. According to econometric estimates, one-point rise in CPI would be linked with a rise in the long-term economic growth by around 1.7 per cent [7]. An additional research (2019) affirmed that endemic corruption has a strong negative impact on the long-run growth: in those countries where corruption is elevated by one standard deviation (inverse CPI scale), real GDP per capita is, in the long-term, about 17% smaller [7]. Therefore, the increased corruption rates are linked to a slower economic development in the future. Corruption, especially, is not good in developing the private sector and small businesses. Federal payments and bribes also act as a supplementary corruption tax, which raises the costs of operation of firms and introduces obstacles to entry into the market. Nation-based and international entrepreneurs are not as eager to spend money on states, which have opaque regulations and make decisions at will, as the official results may be manipulated with the help of illegal actions. This leads to competition becoming less strong and innovative activity being reduced. The effect of corruption can be explained by using the example of the countries in question. The rapid economic growth of China that was experienced in the 1990s and 2000s was characterized by a phenomenon of high rates of corruption coexistence. It was partially justified by a certain incentive system: in spite of the high level of bribery and kickbacks, Chinese officials were highly driven to meet centrally established economic goals (the so-called profit-sharing model, according to the terms of Transparency International) [2]. To put it in straightforward terms, business promotion was promoted in correlation with the economic performance of party officials in the same areas, which fostered their career growth further, albeit the fact that corruption was also thriving abreast of it. Nevertheless, over time, such developmental corruption has created structural imbalance and tensions in the society. The recent years have brought the Chinese economy significant expenses: it is estimated that during the initial years of the 2000s, the annual losses incurred due to corrupt practices were 10-15 percent of the GDP in China [2]. Massive embezzlement and capital outflows, such as illegal financial flows, stay a challenge; in 2014 the amount of the illegal financial flow in and out of China was approximated to be more than USD 1 trillion [2].

Corruption in South Korea has a history of association with cozy relationships between political labels and major business conglomerates (chaebols). In the times of industrialization, some types of so-called clan-based corruption were happening ironically with the high rate of economic development. According to scholars, corruption in Korea had a two-fold impact: first, it negatively affected the efficiency of the state administration; second, it helped the export-oriented conglomerates, i.e., Samsung thrive, as it made the creation of such conglomerates and their development possible and even easier [2]. Practically, winning favors of government patrons were inclined to tolerate the privileges of a few firms in terms of investment and faster growth. Nevertheless, this kind of model

resulted in the accumulation of power in the hands of oligarchic groups and has created discontent among the population. Such outcomes resulted in the biggest political scandal in 2016 (the case of President Park Geun-hye), following which the society was demanding resolute action to be taken against the corruption of business and political influence. The enhanced performance of CPI in South Korea in 2018-2023 can be seen as a good indicator that the decreased corruption has positively influenced the situation in the investment climate. In this case, South Korea is currently rated as a very low-risk nation to be bribed as an investor, and its score in the global Bribery Risk Matrix is 19th out of 194 countries [5].

The effect of corruption on the economy in Japan is lesser as this is relatively low in the country. The legal environment in the country is stable and the institutions are robust which is an attraction to the investors. The respondents of the global survey also indicated that 2% of Japanese answered that they had paid a bribe to receive public services [4], which is extremely lower, indicating the level of transparency in the bureaucracy. However, the cases of corruption as an isolated event, like the one involving bribery when it comes to the organization of the Tokyo Olympics, get much media coverage and can cause a temporary drop in trust, which is negatively captured in the slight decreases in the CPI. The Japanese government recognizes that any expression of corruption is harmful to the business reputation of the country and thus it works in close cooperation with other international organizations to enforce the laws against corruption [8].

To conclude, corruption is a significant impediment to sustainable economic development. Those countries that manage to curb corruption are usually better placed to grow more, receive more investments and also create stronger business growth [7]. Though incidences whereby economic growth exists and yet, there is massive corruption has been witnessed in Asia, the level of development today requires transparency. The economic success of China, Japan and South Korea in the future will be directly based on how well the fight against corrupt practices is realized.

Anti-Corruption Measures (2018–2023)

China: Scale and Specific Features of the Campaign

China has sustained an unmatched anti-corruption crackdown that began in 2012 with President Xi Jinping spearheading the movement in the last five years. Xi also announced a strategy of fighting tigers and flies, i.e. not less than high-rank officials but lower-level bureaucrats at the grassroots level [9]. This trend has gradually shifted since 2018, focusing on institutionalization of the anti-corruption efforts.

Institutional framework. In 2018, the National Supervisory Commission was created as a unitary state institution that would fight corruption, thus granted the power to inspect all the state officials, regardless of whether they are members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The adoption of the Supervision Law enhanced the legal foundation of prosecution of the corruption-related crimes [10], [10]. Simultaneously, there were updated internal CCP disciplinary regulations. From 2018 to 2020, party accountability regulations were defined, and the conflict-of-interest laws were strengthened, former officials joining state-owned enterprises once leaving office were limited, and new policies were established to limit nepotism and insider trading [10], [10].

Scale of enforcement. The Chinese officials expressed a strong will of dealing with corruption within their government circles. Official data show that about 2.3 million public officials had been accountable since the beginning of the campaign, which is an astonishing amount [9] and motivates the uniqueness of the campaign. Others who were punished included over 120 of top party officials, generals of the people liberation army, executives of state-owned enterprises and many more [9]. In 2018, alone, the greatest number of people to face disciplinary sanctions was 621,000 [10]. These mass purges had not happened in China since the Mao period. The speed decreased slightly in 2019-2020 but was still high compared to previous times [10]. The campaign even extended to the hitherto untouchable people; one of the hitherto untouchable figures, Zhou Yongkang,

who was once a member of the Politburo Standing Committee was convicted; a move never seen before.

Sectors and priorities. At first, it was concerned with purification of the party-state apparatus. After that, the anti-corruption campaign was extended to military arena where over 60 generals in the PLA were ousted in their positions [11], and to the financial sector. As of 2019, the CCP has made corruption in finance a priority and dozens of top bank managers and financial regulators are investigated [30]. Meanwhile, there were campaigns against the connections of the officials to organized crime (notably Operation Sky Net), repatriation of the fugitive officials who are corrupt abroad and the misappropriation of the state funds especially the funds that are directed towards the poverty alleviation schemes [10], [10]. Already in 2019, over 99,000 people were punished because of embezzlement and fraud in social funds due to the audit of poverty reduction efforts [10].

The effect of the anti-corruption policy in China has produced some quantifiable results: the CPI score of the country has grown a little bit and development has been observed in some spheres including the decrease of petty bribery in the delivery of the state services [2]. However, the success of the campaign and its objectivity is disputed. According to many onlookers, it is not comprehensive in its nature and does not solve the structural issue at hand- the absence of public accountability of political power [10]. According to critics, the people who are close to Xi Jinping do not get punished and politically marginalized officials are the main targets [10]. This has raised suspicion that anti-corruption measures are also employed to get political opponents out of the way as well as consolidate individual power. Besides, other observers argue that the received reduction in corruption might be a one-off affair, because it is not moderated by institutional changes including judicial independence, free media, and strong civic controls [10]. Nonetheless, Xi Jinping has reiterated that he will not give up on the campaign; in January 2025, he again termed corruption as the biggest enemy of the CCP and made further promises of maintaining heavy pressure [9].

Japan: Scandals and Reforms of the legislature.

Japan is known to have a rather low rate of everyday (petty) corruption and highly developed means of fighting against bribing. However, it has gone a step further in the last five years to enhance its anti-corruption system even further, in part due to international suggestions, and a number of high-profile cases.

Legal reinforcement. Japan is a member of major international anti-corruption treaties, such as OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials. In 2019, the OECD Working Group on Bribery criticized Japan due to low enforcement of foreign bribery, and provided 17 recommendations [8]. To this, the Japanese government revised the Unfair Competition Prevention Act, which is the main law used in criminalizing the bribery of foreign government officials [8]. Parallel to this, in 2021 and 2024 the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) revised its Guidelines on the Prevention of Bribery of Foreign Public Officials, and recommended that Japanese firms follow international anti-corruption standards more closely [8].

Whistleblower protection. One such move was to empower whistleblowers in corruption and other forms of violations. The Japanese parliament enacted the amendments to the Whistleblower Protection Act [12] in June 2020. These amendments, which came into effect in 2022, mandated large organizations to put in place internal reporting and response mechanisms and extended legal protection to employees that blow the whistle over misconduct. Specifically, the penalties and other punitive actions were imposed against employers who intimidated and fired whistleblowers [13], [14]. In 2025, another bundle of amendments was implemented which strengthened these protections [15]. These measures are made up together to promote the internal disclosure of corrupt practices, and thus, promote transparency in both institutions and corporations.

Criminal investigation of particular cases. The law enforcement system in Japan has remained responsible of corrupt related crimes against the public of Japan and businesses.

A number of dozens of bribery cases are revealed and charged each year. A good illustration is the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games corruption scandal that created a lot of publicity. In 2022-2023 some of the highest-ranking persons, such as an Olympic organizing committee member and senior managers of big companies, were arrested and found guilty of bribery in awarding Olympic sponsors [8].

This example showed that Japanese courts were ready to use severe sentences even to the representatives of the elite. On a broader scale, the Japanese legal structure is quite solid: the Penal Code forbids bribing the public officials categorically, imposing a sentence of up to three years of imprisonment on the bribe-giver and five-seven years on the official who accepts a bribe [8], [8]. Any form of undue benefit given to public servant in relation to the execution of his or her duties is criminalized. In effect, these provisions are vigorously enforced by the Japanese prosecutors, but the legal status of companies as criminal agents does not exist with regard to domestic bribery (the domestic bribery is attributed to individual officials in accordance with Article 198 of the Penal Code) [8].

International initiatives. Japan funds and promotes the anti-corruption movements in the Asia-Pacific area. Indicatively, the Japanese government in 2021-2022 via UNDP initiated programs to support the fight against corruption in various developing nations such as Sri Lanka, highlighting the role of Japan as a donor in the process of introducing reforms in the sphere of good governance [16], [17]. Besides that, Japan is a member of the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group and other multilateral forums, which promote greater transparency levels.

However, in spite of these measures, there are still challenges. The international level of enforcement was deficient as Transparency International reported in 2022 the extremely low rate of successful cases of foreign bribery in Japan (no cases in the 2016-2019 period) [8]. Even Japan was not exempt, with its CPI score dropping a few points in 2022-2023 (two points) [4] because Transparency International said that Japan was not active enough in managing the corruption risks and had a number of high-profile scandals [8]. The government in turn created the role of Minister of Administrative Reform and Anti-Corruption (which is occupied in 2023 by Sanae Takaichi) to enhance ethics in the public sector [18]. In general, the Japanese anti-corruption policy is generally considered to be successful because corruption is usually a one-time event, more than systemic, the society and media are very intolerant of bribery, and they are quick to demand resignations and investigations.

South Korea: Reforms, Institutions and Civic Oversight.

There were some major reforms that took place in South Korea between 2018 and 2023 which made the anti-corruption system considerably stronger. The country has had its share of big political fraud cases, which it took advantage of to enhance its legal and institutional system, riding on the high level of demand of accountability and integrity by the people.

New legislative framework. Continuing on the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act, which has been in effect since 2016 (also known as the Kim Young-ran Act), South Korea introduced another important tool of law the Conflict of Interest Prevention Act of Public Officials. This law, which was adopted in 2020 and took effect in May 2022, addresses a significant gap in the regulations. It forbids the involvement of the public officials in those decisions in which they or their immediate family members have personal interest, involves the disclosure of the possible conflict of interest publicly, and provides the responsibility of covering up the disclosed information. A detailed system of laws, the sum of the Improper Solicitation and Graft Act and the Conflict of Interest Prevention Act, including direct bribery as well as indirect forms of corruption, including nepotism and favoritism, had developed by 2023 [5]. Transparency International explicitly indicates that one of the most important factors that have contributed to South Korea better CPI performance is the process by which anti-corruption laws, such as anti-corruption acts have increased [5].

Institutional changes. The most important of the anti-corruption institutions in South Korea is the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission (ACRC). The AAC has been given wider mandates in the recent years to examine the risk of corruption and to review the performance of the policy. Some of the anti-corruption strategies that the government has undertaken include a five year comprehensive anti corruption plan. They have specifically focused on prevention: the ACRC regularly holds systematic reviews of legislations to find out the provisions that are prone to corruption and provide recommendations on how they should be modified [19]. Through these reviews, many loopholes that were being used to perpetrate bribery have been exposed and done away with especially in the people procurement and licensing processes.

Openness and online-ification. South Korea highly emphasizes on technological solutions to bring out transparency. It has created a public online site, the "Clean Portal" that incorporates data on the public procurement, asset statements of officials, complaints by citizens and such like information. Through this portal and other digital platforms, the civil society organizations and journalists can now more easily monitor any possible violations [5]. Moreover, the Integrity Assessment mechanism was established, which criminologically evaluates the state of transparency and ethical norms in all the public institutions on an annual basis on the basis of surveys of the citizens and specialists. The overall picture in the last five years is that the Integrity Scores of the majority of ministries have increased, which means that the level of governance has increased as well.

Targeted policy measures. Government became more strict in management of the public finance in response to cases of embezzlement and misuse of budgetary subsidies (such as misappropriation of grants). There has been a subsidy management system in place since 2021 to avoid paying twice, as well as documenting all transactions so that it is harder to hide money misappropriation [5]. The other issue that was there was the recruitment irregularities such as favours when it came to hiring in the public service and the state owned enterprises. In 2023, the ACRC started broad audits of hiring procedures in all governmental agencies after a scandal of preferential hiring of the relatives of senior officials in the National Election Commission [5], [5]. Manipulation during hiring was tightened and competitive means of recruitment was introduced to the public.

Criminal investigations and high profile. Corruption laws have been applied and enforced in the letter to the latter even to the topmost officials. In 2018 former President Lee Myung-bak was convicted of corruption, and his predecessor Park Geun-hye was also sentenced to bribery and a misuse of power, by 2018 (she had been pardoned in late 2021). These incidents portrayed that there is no person in South Korea who is above the law. In 2020, the 19 th International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) was held in the country alongside Transparency International, which highlights its leadership in the region of this activity [20]. The anti-corruption authorities also actively collaborate with civil society, as an example, the people integrity ombudsman system provides the opportunity to the representatives of the people in some of the investigation, which contributes to an increase in trust in the results.

Whistleblower protection and ethics training.

In South Korea, the protection of the whistleblowers has been greatly improved. The ACRC has a hotline and the e-People portal where bribery and other corrupt activities could be reported at and this ensures that the informants are rewarded with confidentiality and financial incentives. Financial rewards of up to KRW 2 billion were introduced into the law in 2021 to encourage information about serious cases of corruption that results in the recovery of illegal proceeds. The amount of citizens who report cases to the Commission has grown meaning that there is an increased trust in the institutions. The government has also increased ethics education programs, such as the compulsory anti-corruption education of civil servants, special programs by elective and senior officials, and those targeting the youth, such as the so-called Youth Integrity Camps [5]. These

measures combined are to ensure that corruption is eradicated in the society through the creation of a zero tolerance culture.

Due to the above-described measures, the South Koreans have attained much enhanced perception of corruption, which has been evidenced by the increasing CPI score. The positive dynamics are also registered by international indices: in the Index of Public Integrity, South Korea was ranked 15th in the world and 1st in Asia in 2023 [5]. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) combined measurement of the quality of corruption policy puts South Korea in the top 20 countries to evaluate the quality of corruption control in the world once again [20], [20]. There are still persistent problems that include the still significant role of large business groups and polarization of politics, but the country has well-established institutions, including an independent prosecution service, an active media, and robust civic activity, which allows detecting and suppressing violations on high levels. There is therefore no surprise that analysts refer to the successes of South Korea in its anti-corruption efforts as a model worth of emulation by other nations [20], [20].

Openness of Governmental Organizations and Programs to Improve on It.

The openness and responsibility of the government officials is one of the determinants of the level of corruption. The reviewed countries vary in the level of openness in the administration of the country and have undergone diverse initiatives to improve transparency.

China. The transparency of the Chinese institutions is also low. This system of governance is marked by secrecy, manipulation of information and lack of independent media. China also lacks any involvement in the international programs like the Open Government Partnership (OGP) which are aimed at government-civil society cooperation in order to make governments more transparent. However, Chinese government has taken some steps towards enhancing the internal transparency. The open government information regulations were first introduced as early as 2008 and required authorities to disclose the selected information (budgets and plans) and those regulations were revised in 2019 to give citizens more access to information. Secondly, China has also been working on the electronic government services. The latest UN e-government ranking has shown that China has increased its position on the global ranking, up to 43rd (it was ranked 78th in 2012) [21] which is positive news in terms of online service delivery and digital infrastructure. The fact that this group of countries is placed on the list of the countries with a high e-government index indicates that the state is taking a step in the direction of digitalization so that administrations may become more efficient and the procedures would be more transparent to the citizens- such as electronic public services portals restrict the number of opportunities to bribe an official. Nevertheless, there is still no systemic transparency, which can be independent audits of the actions of the officials, the publicity of the income of the officials or the information on the work of the government in general, accessible to the large number of people. This is because the authorities are oversighted by the internal structures of the parties as opposed to the society. Limitations of the freedom of expression and operations of the anti-corruption non-governmental organizations discourage external monitoring. At that, the general transparency level in China is measured at low despite digital advancement.

Japan. The Japanese system of public administration is comparatively open and based on the well-established democratic institutions. The country has an Information Disclosure Law that ensures citizens can demand documents of the government since 2001, and it is similar to freedom-of-information laws. Public reporting by ministries and agencies and publication of budgets, tenders, and other information are the established practices. The level of openness of data is also high: there is the Open Data Japan portal managed by the government that offers hundreds of data sets, including statistics and procurement outcomes. Even though Japan does not belong to OGP, it practices numerous principles of open government in de facto terms. There is active monitoring of government activities by

the independent media and civil society organizations. Most of the major scandals, including Moritomo Gakuen case in 2017 where favors were given to buying of public land, were detected mainly by the investigative journalism and subsequently the parliamentary investigations, which proved the power of the bottom-up control. Japan has gone further in recent years to improve transparency: METI provided companies with guidelines on beneficial ownership disclosure and compliance with anti-money laundering as well as the government formed a Public Procurement Transparency Council in the wake of bid-rigging between contractors. Japan is also included in the list of the Transparency International, the organization that keeps track of the adherence to the anti-corruption principles in other countries; in the 2022 report, it is mentioned that Japan should initiate cases of bribery of foreign officials by its companies more transparently [4]. Digital government programs have also enhanced transparency: Japan has been ranked among the leaders of the world in terms of developing electronic public services (within the top ten countries of the world) [22], which will lessen bureaucracy. Altogether, the Japanese public institutions are rather transparent and responsible, though they can be improved, e.g. the transparency of the political parties financing can be better and the mechanism of amakudari (the transfer of officials to the affiliated work in the private sector after their retirement) should be addressed.

South Korea. South Korea is a nation that is an active advocate of open government ideals and the country is one of the leaders of the world in terms of openness in the public sector. Since 2011, the country is a founding member of the OGP and enacts National Action Plans in this initiative regularly. These plans involve promises of increased civic engagement, greater data release and greater accountability. As an example, the Fourth National Action Plan (2018-2020) already involved the measures that concern open budgets and monitoring subsidies [23].

The outcomes are impressive: South Korea is among the three best countries in the world regarding the evolution of e-government development [22]. South Korea ranked third (after Denmark and Finland) in the composite e-government index in 2022 (as provided by the UN), indicating online services, telecommunications infrastructure, and human capital [22]. This shows that almost all the online services offered to the people are in a transparent and user friendly way. In connection with the process of digitalization, the South Korean country has introduced the KONEPS electronic public procurement system, which the World Bank evaluated as one of the most transparent in the world: 100% of the tenders are conducted on an open electronic platform, which practically eliminates collusion. There is publicly available access to all contracts and auction outcomes. Moreover, over ten years the nation has been undertaking regular Transparency Tests of state institutions, that enable people to test the work of the agencies; these ratings affect the promotion of senior officials. Fiscal transparency has also been enhanced by the government: the Open Budget initiative, which allows tracing budgetary funds to individual projects, was launched, and in 2022 the Ministry of Economy and Finance released the first Fiscal Transparency Report in the history of South Korea, which was rated positively by the International Monetary Fund.

Special attention should be paid to the role of civil society. The non-governmental organizations in South Korea (such as the People Solidarity of Participatory Democracy) are very active and can access information by law which is provided by the corresponding laws. A high degree of press liberty (even though with some restrictions) would help bring out a regular reporting of the cases of corruption and this would create an environment that does not condone the act of corruption. Besides on the enforcement part, the ACRC is also involved in the provision of public awareness which illuminates on the methods of filing petitions, complaints, and applications whenever the citizen is faced with corruption. There is maximum institutional transparency in government sites and applications (e.g. the Clean Portal), which post and update data on gifts taken by officials, asset/income declaration of senior public servants, and report on checks and auditing. All these have

helped South Korea gain a lot of trust among people in its institutions and to be able to achieve a certain stable position in the top of the world surveys of transparency and effectiveness of governmental institutions [20], [20].

In general, Japan and particularly South Korea show a lot of transparency in the institutions of the people, but China, despite some positive changes in e-government, is still shown by the lack of transparency in the realization of state power. As international experience has shown, transparency is an effective tool against corruption, and enhancing transparency is directly linked to a better CPI performance and other indicators of good governance, as the example of the South Korea has shown [5].

Comparison of the Success of the Anti-Corruption Policy.

This comparison of anti-corruption measures and performances in China, Japan and South Korea after the last five years brings out some clear observations.

Corruption strategy and governing structure.

In Japan and South Korea, these are democratic nations that have a separation of powers, free press and a vibrant civil society. They have based their anti-corruption policies on the institutional protection of the state, i.e. independent courts, legislatures, and audit organizations, and the participation of people. This creates a long term pressure on the government to be more transparent and accountable. In China, on the contrary, anti-corruption is sought in a top-down manner by authoritarian means in a one-party rule. An aggressive campaign, where there is a strong centralized campaign has seen an unprecedented number of perpetrators punished [9], but there has been no external check and balances that begs the question of how sustainable these wins are. In comparison, where in Japan and South Korea corruption prevention is structurally entrenched in the government (in terms of conflict-of-interest legislation, codes of ethics, and transparent procedures), in China the anti-corruption policy is heavily personalized and subject to the political will of the highest leadership.

Corruption rates and the current trends.

The CPI trajectories represent policy effectiveness. Japan has always been one of the cleanest countries in a constant state with slight variations, which means that its institutional framework is effective in the long term. South Korea has made a significant breakthrough- a gain of about 4-5 CPI points in recent years [5]- and has improved in comparison among world countries, which points to the real decrease of corruption. Such profits can be associated with the new laws and enhanced oversight systems that have already resulted in comparably fast impact on the views of business and individuals. CPI scores in China have changed insignificantly (between nearly 39 and 42-43), and China is still ranked far behind developed economies [2], [3]. This implies that although the campaign might have helped to decrease the blatant bribery, it has not essentially changed the position of China as compared to the other nations. Corruption has been changing, and presumably shifting towards more covert forms (such as favours returned and nepotism instead of direct bribery) or increased at provincial and local levels. This has resulted in democratic check systems in Japan and South Korea being effective in ensuring long term limits on corruption compared to administrative Chinese systems.

Economic impacts and the investment environment.

The use of anti-corruption in Japan and South Korea has led to enhanced investor confidence and better business environment. South Korea, as an example has improved on business risk-assessment (low bribery risk as rated by TRACE) [5], and has also been getting new foreign direct investment in high-technology sectors in part because it has come to be regarded as a more transparent jurisdiction. In Japan, low standards of corporate compliance have long been supported by low standards of corruption, and when corporations deviated i.e., by previous corporate governance scandals of large corporations, it was more likely to be handled through intense regulation. The crackdown on an economic scale had its results in China as well: the Chinese sources state that this mass crackdown brought about savings in state expenditure and led to the reimbursement

of great amounts of money stolen by corrupt officials [24], [10]. Nevertheless, the campaign did have a byproduct, which would also be described as a freezing effect, because of increased bureaucratic risk aversion, as officials were afraid to make decisions because of being investigated, which at times had a slowing effect on implementing the project. In the long run, a purification of the state apparatus might result in more equitable business practices as long as it is accompanied with more institutional changes. At least until now, however, foreign investors are still considering the significant corruption risks when doing business in China (including informal payments and the perceived need to have political connections) and this puts China in a disadvantage compared to the far more open South Korea and Japanese markets.

Political will and societal demand.

In each of the three countries, different top-down and bottom-up pressures have influenced the formulation of the anti-corruption policy. The political will of Xi Jinping was the deciding factor in China, since without it, such massive reforms would never have seen the light of the day. Nevertheless, the fact that there are no competitive elections makes it difficult to estimate the level of support of the population (yet, the state messaging and the fact that no open opposition to the campaign can be seen may be regarded as the indirect signs of legitimacy). In South Korea, however, there was high social demand in the wake of the corruption scandals of 2016-2017 that saw President Moon Jae-in elected with the mandate to eliminate endemic cases of corruption [20]. The new leadership was politically committed and remained aligned with the populace pressure to reform and this led to the stronger legal framework and increased sustainability of the results since the civil society still requires integrity in the government. The expectations of the people are also important in Japan: the reputational costs of corruption are high enough that they serve to provide an informal deterrent to political elites. Even despite the scandals, Japanese have low tolerance towards misconduct in the society, and the public officials tend to resign when they are even suspected to be involved in a misconduct. In line with this, anti-corruption policies in South Korea and Japan are tighter and supported by society in a more *ustochivny* way, but in China they are more individual and can be reversed in the event of a change in political priorities.

Comparison of Anti-Corruption Instruments.

The instruments used vary significantly in the three nations. Coercive techniques have been the major ones, which have included investigations by party disciplinary inspection commissions, denunciations, surprise inspections, and high-profile trials. The result of this strategy was a kind of shock therapy inside the bureaucracy but did not have a significant effect on system reform. As an illustration, autonomous courts were not created, but rather cases were processed by party organizations, which usually were considered extrajudicial, like *shuanggui*. In Japan, on the contrary, it is focused on prevention: there are specific expectations regarding the behavior of the public authorities, there is transparency, and legal punishment is unavoidable in court. South Korea is a mixture of the two methods. On the one hand, it has taken an integrative approach to anti-corruption laws and preventive measures (including ban on the amount of gifts to high-ranking officials) [25]; on the other hand, it has engaged in high-profile prosecutorial inquiries into high-ranking officials. In the modern history almost all the past presidents have been found guilty on corruption charges or at least suspect of corruption. This preventive strategy along with enforcement is quite effective as can be seen by the increasing CPI score of South Korea. Japan already at a high level, concentrates on keeping standards, but every now and then, legislation is amended to fit the emergent challenges (such as lobbying activities and the so-called revolving door, the practice of officials joining the private-sector jobs) which became a subject of discussion in the 2020s. To China, the main problem is still institutionalization of the successes of the campaign, i.e. establishment of mechanisms that can operate even without the participation of special leaders or one-off campaigns.

Local Background and Experiential Transference.

Japan and South Korea are also proactive in sharing their experience with the other nations via the international bodies offering examples of how corruption can be effectively managed within their Asian environment. The South Korean case, especially, the implementation of the thorough anti-corruption law and the implementation of digital solutions, is often referred to as an example that developing countries in Asia should follow [20], [20]. In contrast, China, advocates its model of hard party discipline as an example to some of the authoritarian regimes though it can hardly be replicated without a similar political system. Simultaneously, China, Japan, and South Korea are members of mutual economic forums in which transparency related matters are discussed. As an example, the ministers of the three countries have discussed anti-corruption measures during meetings as a condition to a stable trade and investment [26]. As such, the three nations have understood that an effective anti-corruption policy is a competitive advantage in the modern global economy and they are either trying to achieve or maintain it.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this comparative study of China, Japan and South Korea in 2018-2023 shows that corruption is a final decisive structural factor that determines the quality of governance, investment confidence and long-term economic growth. The results indicate the evident differences in results: Japan with its traditionally low levels of corruption is supported by its well-established democratic institutions, legal transparency, and high levels of social intolerance to corruption; South Korea with its measurably more developed level of corruption has been impacted by its extensive legal reforms, digital instrumentation of governance, and active civic control; and finally, China with its mass-scale, enforcement-based anti-corruption campaign has failed to produce significant changes in perceived corruption due to the lack of institutional transparency and accountability measures. These findings suggest that institutionalized rule of law, openness, and public participation are more likely to be linked with long term changes in corruption rather than centralized punitive policies alone. Policywise, the study highlights the fact that the issue of anti-corruption strategies must not be considered as an ethical or political tool, but as an integral part of economic policy, which directly affects the climate in the business and sustainable growth. Future studies need to expand the country sample size to capture other emerging economies and employ the econometric model to test the cause and effect relationships to bring more evidence to guide evidence-based anti-corruption and development policies.

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