

Decoding China's Sixth Five-Year Judicial Reform Plan

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Abstract

At the end of 2024, China's Supreme People's Court issued its "Sixth Five-Year People's Courts Reform Plan Outline", following approval by the Political and Legal Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee.

This article decodes the background, content, and implementation of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline. It highlights this plan's differences with previous judicial reform plans and its links with recent programmatic Party documents. The analysis provides insights into the role of the Chinese judiciary in fulfilling the goal, set by the Party leadership, of doing its part to basically achieve socialist modernization. It first introduces the Party policy and drafting background related to the Sixth Reform Plan Outline before providing a detailed overview of its content and comparing it with earlier reform plan outlines.

Entschlüsselung des sechsten chinesischen Fünfjahresplans zur Justizreform — Ende 2024 veröffentlichte der Oberste Volksgerichtshof Chinas nach Genehmigung durch die Kommission für Politik und Recht des Zentralkomitees der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas die „Skizze des Sechsten Fünfjahresplans zur Reform der Volksgerichte“.

Dieser Artikel dekodiert Hintergrund, Inhalt und Umsetzung der Skizze des Sechsten Reformplans. Er hebt die Unterschiede dieses Plans zu früheren Justizreformplänen und deren Verbindungen zu aktuellen programmatischen Parteidokumenten hervor. Die Analyse gibt Aufschluss über die Rolle der chinesischen Justiz bei der Verwirklichung des von der Parteiführung formulierten Ziels, ihren Beitrag dafür zu leisten, die sozialistische Modernisierung im Wesentlichen zu erreichen. Zunächst werden die Parteipolitik und der Entstehungshintergrund der Skizze des Sechsten Reformplans erläutert, bevor ein detaillierter Überblick über deren Inhalt gegeben und dieser mit Skizzen früherer Reformpläne verglichen wird.

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ximus Sandler, student at Monash University and former visiting student at the Peking University School of Transnational Law, for his assistance with several versions of the footnotes of this article.

At the end of 2024, China's Supreme People's Court (SPC) issued its "Sixth Five-Year People's Courts Reform Plan Outline" (Sixth Reform Plan Outline),¹ following approval by the Political and Legal Affairs Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (Party) Central Committee (Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, in Chinese: Zhonggong Zhongyang Zhengfa Weiyuanhui 中共中央政法委员会). This article draws on the author's research, observations, and discussions with current and former participants in the judicial reform process and others affiliated with the judicial system to decode the background, content, and implementation of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline. It highlights this plan's differences with previous judicial reform plans and its links with recent programmatic Party documents. The analysis provides insights into the role of the Chinese judiciary in fulfilling the long-term goal, set by the Party leadership, of doing its part to basically achieve socialist modernization.

The Sixth Reform Plan Outline has two primary goals. First, it is intended to signal to the political leadership that the SPC is fulfilling its political duties by implementing Party policy priorities as contained in the 20th Party Congress Decision, the 2024 Third Plenum of the 20th Party Congress Resolution, and subsequent documents such as the 2025 Fourth Plenum of the 20th Party Congress (the Fourth Plenum documents).² Those documents emphasize that courts play a critical role in supporting the Party and government policies directed towards the Party's long-term goal of "basically achieving socialist modernization."³ The Sixth Reform Plan

Outline implements the political-legal reforms outlined in a framework document issued by the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission.⁴ It also announces to the lower courts and related institutions the policy issues to which the Party and SPC leadership have given priority and usefully packages them in one document. This article first introduces the Party policy and drafting background related to the Sixth Reform Plan Outline before providing a detailed overview of its content and comparing it with earlier reform plan outlines.

I. Policy and Drafting Background

The fundamental principle of absolute Party leadership and Party Center approval of major judicial reforms means that the content of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline must be coordinated with the priorities of the Party leadership.⁵ Those priorities are signaled in related Party

1 人民法院第六个五年改革纲要（2024—2028 年），December 26, 2024; Chinese version available at <<https://www.chinacourt.cn/article/detail/2024/12/id/8404364.shtml>> visited January 15, 2026, plan archived at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20260120011706/https://xinwen.bjd.com.cn/content/s676cd24ee4b000299bade335.html>>.

2 Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee, documents and reports collected at <<https://www.12371.cn/special/20jszqh/>>, visited January 19, 2026, archived at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20260115172028/https://www.12371.cn/special/20jszqh/>>; English translation of the Recommendations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China for Formulating the 15th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (hereinafter Central Committee Recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan) available at <<http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/FourthPlenarySessionof20thCPCCentralCommittee.html>> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/ACR6-KU6U>>.

3 See Central Committee Recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan, at I.2.

4 That document is the Outline for Comprehensively Deepening Political and Legal Reform (2023–2027) 全面深化政法改革实施纲要（2023—2027 年），not publicly available but mentioned in many official SPC and Supreme People's Procuratorate and lower court and procuratorate documents, and in this article, see for example, TONG Jianming, 论习近平法治思想的公正司法观 (On Xi Jinping's Thought on the Rule of Law: The Concept of Impartial Justice), April 30, 2024, <https://login.12309.gov.cn:8443/spp/zd gz/202404/t20240430_653260.shtml>, visited January 21, 2026, archived at <https://login.12309.gov.cn:8443/spp/zd gz/202404/t20240430_653260.shtml>. The latter document implements the 2019 Central Implementing Opinion on the Comprehensive Deepening Reforms of the Political-Legal Sector 关于政法领域全面深化改革的实施意见, also not publicly available but approval mentioned here 会议提要 (Meeting Summary), <<https://www.12371.cn/special/zyqmshggl dxzhy19/>>, visited January 21, 2026, archived at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20251216101019/https://www.12371.cn/special/zyqmshggl dxzhy19/>>.

5 See Articles 17–18, 中国共产党政法工作条例 (Regulation on the Communist Party of China's Political-Legal Work), January 18, 2019, Chinese version available at <https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-01/18/content_5359135.htm> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20190207084810/https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-01/18/content_5359135.htm>, English translation available at <<https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/regulation-on-the-communist-party-of-chinas-political-legal-work/>>. On the definition of the Party Center, it is "strategically ambiguous". See LI Ling, Appeal of Strategic Ambiguity on Party Centre: Reading the Party Directive on the Operation of the Central Committee (Part I), The China Collection, 18 October 2020, available at: <<https://thechinacollection.org/appeal-strategic-ambiguity-party-centre-reading-party-directive-operation-central-committee/>>, visited January 18, 2026. Also see the discussion at Holly Snape, New Regulations for the Central Committee: Codifying Xi Era Democratic Centralism, <<https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/new-regulations-for-the-central-committee-codifying-xi-era>>.

documents. As of this writing, the most recent related Party documents are those issued during the Fourth Plenum of the 20th Central Committee, preceded by the Central Committee policy document "Opinions on Strengthening New Era Judicial Work" (New Era Judicial Work Opinions).⁶ This latter document was released in mid-July 2025 although it is dated February 2025.

The Sixth Reform Plan Outline is consistent with the two later Party documents, signalling the political wisdom of the drafters and, likely, ongoing coordination during the course of drafting. Moreover, the usual practice is that programmatic Party documents draw on submissions by the relevant institutions, in this case by the SPC.⁷ SPC leaders likely were aware of the content of the New Era Judicial Work Opinions when they were finalizing the Sixth Reform Plan Outline. The SPC would have contributed reports, consistent in content, for the drafting of the Central Committee Recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan. The latter document and the New Era Judicial Work Opinions are more authoritative; however, for the lower courts, the Sixth Reform Plan Outline is more detailed. When implementing it, the SPC will incorporate relevant provisions from the 2025 Fourth Plenum documents and any subsequent relevant central Party documents.

The drafting of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline was typical of the SPC's previous judicial reform plans, but the process is not well known and so is summarized below.

1. Drafting the Sixth Reform Plan Outline

The drafting of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline took approximately one year and followed the

democratic-centralism/>, December 1, 2020, visited January 18, 2026.

6 中共中央关于加强新时代审判工作的意见, published on July 14, 2025 and promulgated on February 8, 2025; Chinese version available at <https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202507/content_7031860.htm> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/H3EE-9RWF>>, English translation available at <<http://www.zyip.com/en/show-1444.html>> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/7PUB-AATR>>.

7 Xi Jinping's explanation of the recommendations noted that in late February, the CCP Central Committee deployed some central and state organs to conduct research on 35 key topics, likely including the SPC. *Xi Jinping* 习近平, 关于《中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十五个五年规划的建议》的说明 (Explanation of the "Suggestions of the CPC Central Committee on Formulating the 15th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development"), October 28, 2025, <<https://www.12371.cn/2025/10/28/ARTI1761640597323164.shtml>>, visited January 19, 2026, archived at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20251107154647/https://www.12371.cn/2025/10/28/ARTI1761640597323164.shtml>>.

SPC's usual practice, which means that SPC leadership designated a drafting team. For the second through fifth reform plan outlines, the SPC's Judicial Reform Office led the drafting. This time, as previously with the 1999 initial reform plan outline, a team located in the Research Office was responsible but some of those involved in drafting the plan formerly worked in the Judicial Reform Office.⁸ The drafting involved input from the lower courts, relevant institutions of the SPC, and affiliated government organs. The team convened workshops in Beijing and went to selected local courts to conduct research and hold workshops. They also solicited reports from other divisions and offices of the SPC to incorporate content from SPC specialized divisions. Views of related Party and state institutions were solicited. Unlike reform plans in some other jurisdictions, no draft was issued for public comment, but as is its usual practice, the SPC invited a few experts to provide their views at a late stage.⁹ The SPC leadership, likely its Party Group, approved the draft before it was submitted to the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, and it is likely that the drafting team regularly coordinated with the commission's staff before the draft was finalized.¹⁰

II. Content of the Reform Plan

1. How is the Sixth Reform Plan Outline Different?

The Sixth Reform Plan Outline differs from the five earlier plans and particularly from the first four because it does not focus on structural

8 改革就是要不断提升人民群众的司法获得感 最高法有关部门负责人解读工作报告 (Reform aims to continuously enhance the public's sense of judicial satisfaction. A relevant official from the Supreme People's Court interprets the work report.), March 8, 2023, Chinese version available at <https://www.sohu.com/a/651410913_117927>. Visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/JS4Y-9GJC>>. See a related discussion at *Susan Finder*, Update on the Supreme People's Court's Judicial Reform Office, September 28, 2023, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2023/09/28/update-on-the-supreme-peoples-courts-judicial-reform-office/>>.

9 守正创新话司改 (Upholding the truth and innovating on judicial reform), November 16, 2024, Chinese version available at <<https://ipc.court.gov.cn/zh-cn/news/view-3678.html>> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://ipc.court.gov.cn/zh-cn/news/view-3678.html>>.

10 The members of a Party Group (党组), such as the SPC's and those of lower courts, consist of the key decision-makers in those state organizations. *Holly Snape*, The rise of party law: rewiring the party, recalibrating the party-state relationship. In *The China Journal*, Volume 92 (1):1-26, (2024).

reform measures for the lower courts (and related institutions) to implement. In contrast to the 2014–18 Fourth Five-Year Reform Plan Outline, the SPC thus far has issued little publicity, neither domestically nor internationally. One possible reason is that the SPC's Judicial Reform Office, whose senior officials occasionally faced the domestic public and international press at the height of the judicial reform process, has been disbanded.¹¹ Additionally, the Sixth Reform Plan Outline emphasizes different matters from some of the earlier reform plans and takes a different approach to some of the same topics than its predecessors did. A closer look shows that it is much shorter and omits some matters. The reasons are many and complicated. Some earlier reform measures are already in place, while others, such as judicial transparency, are not regarded as important as in earlier reform plans. While both the fourth and fifth reform plan outlines had explicitly encouraged local initiatives,¹² such language is missing from this one. Technology, data, and security are more important than ever before.

2. Content of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline

The Sixth Reform Plan Outline addresses Party, substantive, procedural, judicial-administrative, and other policy issues and consolidates SPC President Zhang Jun's major initiatives. The first of its nine subsections sets out Party issues. It emphasizes coordinating judicial priorities with

those of the Party leadership. The overlap between the New Era Judicial Opinions and the Sixth Reform Plan Outline illustrates that coordination was effective. Within the court system, each phrase and sentence of a reform plan outline is a matter to be implemented. This overview of the content of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline can only provide highlights.

a) Party issues

Consistent with the fundamental principle of absolute Party leadership of the judiciary, the first set of provisions in the Sixth Reform Plan Outline is focused on strengthening Party leadership. Although these are the provisions that leap out for the foreign reader, they are just a repackaging of prior obligations of the courts under a system in which the Party exercises absolute leadership. Local court leaders would be well aware of the requirements in this section. What is significant is the overlap between the Sixth Reform Plan Outline and the New Era Judicial Work Opinions; this signals coordination between the SPC and the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission. Two examples of the repackaging of prior obligations are the first and second provisions: making Xi Jinping Rule of Law Thought a compulsory course for regular and long-term judicial education and training; and implementing the system of reporting on major matters. The latter ensures that the SPC reports major matters to the Party Center and, analogously, that lower courts do the same with Party Committees of the same level. The former is a pre-existing requirement of judicial training programs, found in the current and previous judicial training plans,¹³ while the latter is required by the Party's Political-Legal Work Regulations.¹⁴

11 See *Susan Finder*, Update on the Supreme People's Court's Judicial Reform Office *supra* note 7.

12 最高人民法院关于全面深化改革的意见——第四个五年改革纲要（2014–2018 年）（Opinion of the Supreme People's Court on Deepening Reform of the People's Courts Comprehensively: Outline of the Fourth Five-year Reform of the People's Courts (2014–2018)), February 4, 2015, Chinese version available at <<http://gongbao.court.gov.cn/Details/79ebc817429244b15c6e6f2bba2e8a.html>> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/G4XL-3RPW>>. English translation available at <<https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/court-reform-plan/>>; 最高人民法院关于深化人民法院司法体制综合配套改革的意见——人民法院第五个五年改革纲要（2019–2023）（Supreme People's Court Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Judicial System with Comprehensive Integrated Reforms – Outline of the Fifth Five-Year Reform Program of the People's Courts (2019–2023)), February 27, 2019, Chinese version available at <<http://gongbao.court.gov.cn/Details/31823e36c659fae4510ea19a0a5a87.html>> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/MBH7-QQ7C>>. English translation available at <<https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/supreme-peoples-court-opinions-on-deepening-the-reform-of-the-judicial-system-with-comprehensive-integrated-reforms-outline-of-the-fifth-five-year-reform-program-of-the-peoples-courts-2019-2023/>>.

13 *Susan Finder*, Educating Chinese Judges for New Challenges in the New Era, February 26, 2020, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2020/02/26/educating-chinese-judges-for-new-challenges-in-the-new-era/>>; 最高人民法院关于印发《2019—2023 年全国法院教育培训规划》的通知（Notice of the Supreme People's Court on Issuing the “National Court Education and Training Plan 2019–2023”），September 13, 2019, Chinese version available at <<https://www.pkulaw.com/chl/17723cc69a9effd0bdfb.html>>; 最高人民法院印发《全国法院教育培训规划（2024–2028 年）》（Supreme People's Court issued the “National Court Education and Training Plan (2024–2028)”），December 23, 2024, Chinese version available at <<https://www.chinacourt.cn/article/detail/2024/12/id/8364245.shtml>> visited January 15, 2026, another version archived at <<https://www.shanghaiinvest.com/cn/viewfile.php?id=20373>>.

14 国共产党政法工作条例（Regulation on the Communist Party of China's Political-Legal Work），*supra* note 4.

b) Supporting major strategies of the Party and government

The second set of provisions in the Sixth Reform Plan Outline call on the courts to support major Party and government strategies and central tasks, consistent with the current slogan, “wherever the work of the Party and government advance, judicial services will follow” (党和国家中心工作推进到哪里, 司法服务就跟进到哪里), a revised version of an earlier slogan.¹⁵ Those provisions are also found in the New Era Judicial Work Opinions, although under a different heading. The major strategies include a legalized business environment, new quality productive forces, a strong financial nation, environmental governance, high-level opening-up, and judicial aspects of the one country-two systems policy (towards Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan). Supporting major Party and government strategies and central tasks means that the courts will implement relevant provisions in the Fourth Plenum documents.

The central tasks are supporting state security and social stability, people's livelihood, and juvenile justice. Supporting state security and social stability is listed first. It imposes accountability (responsibility) on the Party Group of courts to maintain social stability, and it calls for improvement of rules about state security, social stability (which is not further specified), and *saohei* cases. It also calls for improvements in the role of the courts in network governance.¹⁶ Court leaders would know that these matters are linked to the Party's policies on the Overall National Security Outlook.¹⁷ Linked to the Party's “People's livelihood” policies are issues such as food and drug

safety, medical and elder care, family disputes, rules for platform workers and other new forms of employment, labor and employment, delayed retirement, and better legal infrastructure to protect the disabled. It is unclear whether this means that the SPC will draft more specific rules on employment discrimination.

The priorities for the courts in supporting major strategies have clear practical impacts. The longest provision in this section is the one on the “legalized business environment”, and it has the most direct impact on the economy. It incorporates provisions on treating different types of enterprises equally, preventing and rectifying mistaken convictions of entrepreneurs, better protecting businesses against government abuses, and breaking down local barriers to create a unified national market. The Central Committee Recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan contain a section on the unified national market and the importance of unifying the underlying institutions and rules of the market. The inclusion of this section means that those matters will be important for the SPC and lower courts. 2016 SPC documents focus on the treatment of entrepreneurs, signalling that little progress has been made in the past decade.¹⁸ The corresponding section in the Sixth Reform Plan Outline also contains more detailed rules concerning monopoly and unfair competition as well as a sentence on bankruptcy reforms that includes “improving cross-border bankruptcy assistance mechanisms.” When the SPC implements this provision, it will consider relevant international hard and soft law and non-Chinese judicial practices.

Other aspects of “supporting major Party and government strategies” in the Sixth Judicial Reform Plan Outline are reiterated in the Fourth Plenum documents, and the judicial system will therefore focus on them. One section of the Central Committee Recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan is devoted to improving “new quality productive forces.”¹⁹ That means that the related section of the Sixth Judicial Reform Plan

15 司法服务高质量发展: 三个始终坚定不移 (Judicial Services for High-Quality Development: Three Unwavering Commitments), December 13, 2025, available at <<https://ipc.court.gov.cn/zh-cn/news/view-5053.html>> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/6H5E-V35N>>.

16 For a brief explanation of *saohei*, see Jeremy Daum, Crackdown on Underworld Forces, undated, <<https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/criminal-procedure-2/Crackdown-on-Underworld-Forces/>> and Changhao WEI/Taige HU, “Sweep Away Darkness, Eliminate Evil”: A Belated Overview of China's First Organized Crime Law, December 14, 2022”, <<https://npcobserver.com/2022/12/14/sweep-away-darkness-eliminate-evil-a-belated-overview-of-chinas-first-organized-crime-law/>>, December 14, 2022, visited January 17, 2026.

17 CHEN Yixin 陈一新, 全面贯彻总体国家安全观 (Fully Implement the Overall National Security Outlook), originally published in 求是 Qiushi, April 15, 2024, bilingual version, at <<https://interpret.csis.org/translations/fully-implement-the-overall-national-security-outlook/>>, visited January 19, 2026.

18 Susan Finder, What the Central Economic Work Conference Means for the Chinese Courts, December 21, 2016, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2016/12/21/what-the-central-economic-work-conference-means-for-the-chinese-courts/>>, visited January 18, 2026.

19 China unleashes new quality productive forces in push for reform, innovation, <https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202406/25/content_WS667a2943c6d0868f4e8e8835.html>, June 24, 2024, visited January 19, 2026, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20240711012044/https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202406/25/content_WS667a2943c6d0868f4e8e8835.html>.

will take on greater political importance, as the courts play a crucial role in protecting major new technology innovations as well as in providing new legal rules concerning data, artificial intelligence, algorithms, and Internet governance. A separate section provides judicial support for China as a “strong financial nation”. This section reiterates protecting the interests of small and medium-sized investors, coordinating administrative enforcement with the courts, and preventing financial risks while dealing with new issues such as digital currency and cross-border financing disputes. It is to be expected that the SPC will also support the types of finance highlighted in the 2025 4th Plenum of the 20th Central Committee documents.

Additional Party and government strategies stressed in the Sixth Reform Plan Outline include environmental law and cross-border matters. Although the number of environmental disputes in the Chinese courts continues to decline, the SPC anticipates greater involvement in environmental-governance-related matters, such as evolving rules on carbon emission rights, voluntary greenhouse-gas emission reduction transactions, and water rights. It also anticipates better enabling environmental restoration in enforcement proceedings. The priorities on “high-level opening up” for the most part repeat policies identified over the past 10 years, with the exception of special emphases on maritime-related matters and on facilitating the hearing of disputes between non-Chinese parties in which foreign (non-Chinese) law governs. The section on “high-level opening up” mentions improving the mechanisms for mutual recognition and enforcement of cross-border arbitration awards and civil and commercial judgments, actively participating in the formulation of international rules, strengthening judicial international exchanges and cooperation, and the judicial protection of Chinese interests overseas, all of which will involve considering non-Chinese and international legislation and judicial practices. These link to the Chinese government’s vision of global governance and the international legal order.²⁰

On policies relating to Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, the Sixth Reform Plan Outline repeats statements from related policy documents over the last several years, such as supporting the national Greater Bay Area (GBA) policy

through harmonization of judicial and legal rules. This policy deserves greater attention. This section of the outline reiterates improving judicial assistance among GBA jurisdictions, greater cooperation in mediation and arbitration, and working with administrative departments to resolve disputes. The Fourth Plenum documents repeat the long-standing policy opposing “Taiwan independence”. Provisions on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are incorporated into the article on foreign-related disputes in the New Era Judicial Work Opinions.

c) Preventing and resolving disputes

Both the New Era Judicial Work Opinions and the Sixth Reform Plan Outline the following section emphasize preventing and resolving disputes. Both documents reiterate important social governance policies emphasized the in past five years involving the courts, among other political-legal institutions. Among those policies are: such as promoting the Fengqiao Experience; better resolving letters and visits (xinfang 信访); resolving disputes at source; “general-to-general cooperation (总对总) and promoting mediation first (调解优先) and “smart court” (online) court services.²¹ Although many of these initiatives are continuations of prior mechanisms, others are new. Since taking office, President Zhang Jun has emphasized lower-court handling of letters and visits.²² The provisions on online case services reiterate prioritizing online and cross-jurisdiction case filing, including online filing of cross-border cases. One new initiative is issuing standard form litigation documents for both represented and non-represented parties; in this, the SPC cooperates with the Ministry of Justice and the All-China Lawyers Association. It is unclear

20 See a brief summary in Susan Finder, What's New in SPC Support for Foreign-Related Rule of Law, May 19, 2025, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2025/05/19/whats-new-in-spc-support-for-foreign-related-rule-of-law/>>, visited January 19, 2026.

21 CHEN Hongjie, How Dispute Governance Stabilizes Legal Expectations—The Legalization Principle of the “Fengqiao Experience” in the New Era, <<http://www.socio-legal.sjtu.edu.cn/en/wxzy/info.aspx?itemid=5030&lcid=73>>, visited January 18, 2026, archived at <<https://web.archive.org/web/20260120022126/http://www.socio-legal.sjtu.edu.cn/en/wxzy/info.aspx?itemid=5030&lcid=73>>. Originally published in Chinese as 纠纷治理如何稳定法律预期——新时代“枫桥经验”的法治化原理 in the Jiaotong University Law Review, No. 5, 2025; Susan Finder, Active Justice—Resolving Real Estate and Construction Disputes At Source, July 31, 2023, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2023/07/31/active-justice-resolving-real-estate-and-constructiondisputes-at-source/>>.

22 Susan Finder, New Spirit at the Supreme People's Court, May 8, 2023, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2023/05/08/new-spirit-at-the-supreme-peoples-court/>>, visited January 18, 2026.

whether this latter initiative is intended to improve access to justice or to ease the processing burden on the filing divisions of courts, which operate litigation service centres.

d) Improving litigation

This section of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline (under “judicial reform” in the New Era Judicial Work Opinions) touches on criminal procedure, civil procedure, administrative litigation, retrial, enforcement, state compensation procedure, and court fees reform. The lengthiest provision in this section sets out the most important policy goals for better protecting the rights of individuals in the criminal justice and affiliated systems. The SPC document provides more details than the New Era Judicial Work Opinions. The repetition of some of these basic reform measures in the Fourth Reform Plan Outline’s “trial-centered” system—evidence-based judgments, witnesses and evaluators appearing in court, and requiring second-instance hearings—signals both their importance and how difficult it to reform the criminal justice system, which has been described variously as an “iron triangle” or a “production line” (公检法都是一条龙). Criminal procedure law reforms currently under consideration link to this provision.²³

e) Judicial responsibility and accountability

This section of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline is labelled “judicial reform” in the New Era Judicial Work Opinions. It focuses on supervision and accountability, but it also contains provisions on applying the law and judicial transparency. Both the Party and SPC documents emphasize the responsibilities of senior court leaders, such as the court president and vice presidents, to supervise ordinary judges to ensure that they handle difficult or sensitive cases correctly, act ethically, and do not succumb to social pressure or corruption. The fourth and fifth judicial reform plan outlines also stressed judicial responsibility and accountability reform, which Tongji Law School dean and former SPC judicial reform participant Professor Jiang Huiling described “a

politician’s wisdom”.²⁴ The Sixth Reform Plan Outline prioritizes further work on accountability standards and the operation of disciplinary committees. Judges, particularly when writing internally, have criticized unclear standards for accountability and disciplinary committees with limited autonomy.

One provision in this section of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline addresses the “application of law” (法律适用). The ideal that it expresses is a system that is interconnected, standardized, efficient, and uniform across the court system. It calls for improving judicial interpretation procedures for judicial interpretations, “case guidance”, and the new databases that President Zhang Jun initiated, namely the People’s Courts Case Database (renmin fayuan anliku 人民法院案例库) and the Court Answers Database (fadawang 法答网).²⁵ “Application of law” is linked to the unification of the national market, which has been highlighted earlier in this article, as well as to the importance of unifying the underlying institutions and rules of the market.

This section also contains measures relating to increasing, standardizing, and limiting judicial transparency. These measures include “improving” rules for the SPC’s basic transparency platforms—China Judgements Online (caipan wenshu wang 裁判文书网 <<https://wenshu.court.gov.cn/>>, China Court Trial Online (tingshen gongkai wang 庭审公开网) <<https://tingshen.court.gov.cn/>>, and China Judicial Process Information Online (shenpan liucheng wang 审判流程网) <<https://splcgk.court.gov.cn/gzfwwww/>>—to provide clearer guidance on the scope of transparency. It also mentions setting out norms for giving access to judicial data to entities outside the court system. At the same time, it also stresses data security and protecting personal information as well as the need for better rules for anonymizing judgments. These measures connect back to provisions on digital courts (discussed below). As of the beginning of 2026, judgments and rulings posted in 2025 have

23 推动中国特色社会主义刑事诉讼法治体系完善与发展 (Promoting the improvement and development of the socialist criminal procedure legal system with Chinese characteristics), December 9, 2025, available at <https://www.spp.gov.cn/spp/llyj/202512/t20251209_713139.shtml> last visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/LN3T-BNNQ>>.

24 Susan Finder, Dean Jiang Huiling on the Last 10 Years of Judicial Reform, March 29, 2023, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2023/03/29/dean-jiang-huiling-%e8%92%8b%e6%83%a0%e5%b2%ad-on-the-last-10-years-of-judicial-reform/>>, visited January 18, 2026.

25 Susan Finder, Supreme People’s Court’s New Court Answers Platform, September 4, 2024, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2024/09/04/supreme-peoples-courts-new-court-answers-platform/>>; Susan Finder, Update on the People’s Court Case Database, December 24, 2024, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/2024/12/24/update-on-the-peoples-court-case-database/>>.

anonymized the names of natural persons and corporate parties. It can be anticipated from the language in this provision that the scope of judgments and rulings to be made public through China Judgements Online will be narrowed in comparison to the 2015–19 period.

f) Trial management

Judicial policies under SPC President Zhang Jun stress trial management (审判管理) as a method by which to administer the court system²⁶. This emphasis is symbolized by the SPC's designation of trial management as a top keyword.²⁷ As head of the Supreme People's Procuratorate, Zhang Jun had stressed procuratorial management. This section of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline stresses three aspects of trial management: trial quality and efficiency, case quality review, and case deadlines. All three aspects burden judges at all four levels of the Chinese courts. The increasing caseload implies that trial management will be an even greater burden for the lower courts.

g) Institutional systems

The section on institutional systems contains five provisions relating to the internal structure and operation of the SPC and lower courts: internal institutions; circuit courts; specialized courts and court institutions; basic-level courts; and the guarantee of court funding. The provision on circuit courts signals that the SPC leadership has changed its approach to the six circuit courts that it has established and that they are encouraging operational divisions to hear cases "on circuit" and to better publicize those hearings. Internal institutional reform appears to be aimed at the practice of lower-court leadership establishing multiple internal divisions to enable promotions. The third group of provisions in this set, on specialized courts and institutions, relates to specific institutions and the role of each, for example the risk-monitoring capacity of the financial courts and their divisions (tribunals). The section on basic court infrastructure reiterates two policies promoted by SPC President Zhang Jun: encouraging "Fengqiao Style People's Tribunals" and

giving additional support to local courts in underdeveloped areas.²⁸ The provision on court funding signals that the court funding reform promoted in the Fourth Reform Plan Outline was not completely successful.

h) Personnel matters

This section contains six sets of provisions. That number itself signals the importance of personnel-related matters. The first set focuses on political matters, including by reiterating the principle of the Party managing cadres, political qualities being most important, and the Party group of a higher court administering the leadership of lower courts. The second set of provisions on personnel addresses "capacity-building," i.e., education and training, improving pre-service training, training in specialized areas, and co-operation between the courts and law schools. Assessment and evaluation are also included in this section, illustrating the importance of personnel to SPC President Zhang Jun. Inadequacies in the treatment of judicial support personnel are

28 An academic article explains Fengqiao-style People's Tribunals as "a practical expression of preventive justice, the construction of 'the Fengqiao-style dispatched people's tribunals' requires the dispatched people's tribunals to study and judge the development of social conflicts and disputes under their jurisdiction based on judicial big data, and to help the party committees and governments at the grassroots level to realize the management of conflicts and disputes at the source by means of judicial advice, to make good use of mediation systems to promote grassroots societies' ability to manage conflicts, and to effectively perform the statutory function of guiding people's mediation and guaranteeing the operation of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms on the track of rule of law". CAO Ting (曹庭), "枫桥式人民法庭"建设的运作逻辑与优化路径 (The operational logic and optimization path of building "Fengqiao-style people's tribunals"), Faxue Pinglun 法学评论 (Law Review) #3, 2025, pp 78, summarized at <<https://www.pkulaw.com/qikan/e9b7b7e02b7ffa04d8afc4bde617ac57bdfb.html?way=listView>>. These tribunals are briefly mentioned at Susan Trevaskes/Delia Lin, Embedding "Society" into the Chinese Communist Party's Rule of Law. Hague Journal of the Rule of Law Volume 17, 359 pp (2025). 打造枫桥式人民法庭 做实指导专业性行业性调解职能 (Building Fengqiao-style People's Tribunals and Effectively Implementing Professional and Industry-Specific Mediation Functions), October 4, 2025, available at <https://www.ftcourt.gov.cn/xwzx/fzyw/content/post_1612797.html> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/DM5X-9UGR>>; on weak courts, see 固本强基再攻坚——人民法院持续推进相对薄弱基层法院建设工作综述 (Strengthening the Foundation and Overcoming Further Challenges: A Summary of the People's Courts' Continuous Efforts to Improve the Construction of Relatively Weak Grassroots Courts), October 14, 2025, available at <<https://baiyin.chinagascourt.gov.cn/Show/101784>> visited January 15, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/J7UN-BG6X>>.

26 For a detailed examination of trial management in China, see CHENG, Jinhua, Managing the Workload of Chinese Courts: An Empirical and Comparative Perspective, Abingdon, 2026.

27 Susan Finder, Supreme People's Court's top keywords in 2023 and their impact in 2024, January 16, 2024, <<https://supremepeoplescourtmirror.com/2024/01/16/supreme-peoples-courts-top-keywords-in-2023-and-their-impact-in-2024/>>.

also addressed here. Improving procedures for selecting judges and promoting judicial (judge's) assistants to be promoted to judges, a difficulty for young people in the court system, is stressed, as well as better protections for judges, which has been another ongoing concern for judges themselves.

i) Digital courts (smart courts)

The Sixth Reform Plan Outline uses the term “digital courts” (数字法院) rather than “smart courts” (智慧法院), reflecting not only SPC President Zhang Jun's preferred terminology but national Digital China policy.²⁹ The three provisions in the section on digital (smart) courts summarize the latest SPC policies relating to the use of technology in the courts: focus on digital court infrastructure, infrastructure security, and the use of artificial intelligence. The first provision signals that the SPC seeks greater control over lower-court judicial data and to use that data to administer the courts, while the third focuses on the use of AI for risk management, judicial administration, and hearings. The provision on AI signals that the SPC seeks to set internationally significant ethical rules on the application of the technology in the courts, which ties into national policies on AI and digitalization.

III. Implementing Judicial Reforms

How judicial reform is implemented is not well understood. The SPC issues annual work plans, annual judicial reform work priorities, and counterpart judicial reform work plans, as well as work plans that implement the five-year reform plan outline.³⁰ These will incorporate provisions from the Fourth Plenum documents. In a separate document or documents, the SPC leadership allocates responsibility to one or more divisions or offices of the SPC for drafting or preparing specific measures. For the present judicial reform plan, the allocation documents have not been made public, unlike the practice some years ago. The judicial interpretations and policy documents issued in 2025 likely fulfill the targets in these allocation documents. Local courts issue

implementing measures such as “annual judicial reform work priorities”. Few of these local-court implementing measures have been made public.³¹ The SPC also issues and makes accessible documents that highlight typical judicial reform cases. The focus used to be on judicial reform practices that could be replicated; however, the cases issued in 2025 focus on the procedural law issue of transferring certain cases to higher courts (elevating jurisdiction) ated jurisdiction, which is consistent with changes to the judicial reform outline.³²

The Sixth Reform Plan Outline makes the Party Group of the SPC responsible for coordinating, implementing, and evaluating the tasks it sets out. The Party groups of the lower courts have the primary responsibility for implementing the reforms and consulting with the relevant institutions to resolve issues, and so it is to be expected that the SPC will report to the Party Center on implementation of the reforms as part of its overall reporting responsibility.

IV. Conclusion

The Sixth Reform Plan Outline does not focus on structural reform measures but rather announces Party leadership and SPC priorities for the courts. The Fourth Plenum documents and any subsequent relevant central Party documents will have an impact on how it is implemented. The Central Committee Recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan and the New Era Judicial Work Opinions, made public about half a year after the Sixth Reform Plan Outline, are more authoritative; but for the lower courts, the latter document provides greater detail. It incorporates Party, substantive, procedural, judicial-administrative, and other policy matters into one document. The Sixth Reform Plan Outline crystalizes SPC President Zhang Jun's priorities, major initiatives, and it uses his preferred terminology.

29 中共中央 国务院印发《数字中国建设整体布局规划》(CCP Central Committee State Council Issue “Plan for the Overall Layout of Building a Digital China”), translation and links to the original Chinese and archived version at <<https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/translation-plan-for-the-overall-layout-of-building-a-digital-china/>>.

30 关于贯彻落实 2020 年人民法院司法改革工作要点的分工方案 (Plan for implementing the allocation of the priorities of 2020 judicial reform work), March 4, 2020, Chinese version available at <<https://chinaspc.files.wordpress.com/2023/12/2020-judicial-reform-allocation-plan.pdf>>.

31 2025 年全市法院司法改革工作要点 (Priorities of the Judicial Reform Work of the City's Courts in 2025), June 27, 2025, available at <<https://www.gzcourt.gov.cn/sfgg/ck285/2025/03/17171423051.html>>, visited January 17, 2026, archived at <<https://perma.cc/LWT9--7VLH>>, also available at <<https://supremepeoplescourtmonitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/gz-intermediate-court-2025-judicial-reform.pdf>>.

32 最高人民法院发布《人民法院司法改革案例选编 (十四)》暨 2024 年度提级管辖典型案例 (The Supreme People's Court released the “Selected Cases of Judicial Reform in People's Courts (XIV)” and 2024 Typical Cases of Elevated Jurisdiction), July 29, 2025, Chinese version available at <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/G13LLNGbpEOCJLrXlanu_w>.

The analysis above has covered a broad range of issues, from better protection for entrepreneurs to the integration of Hong Kong and Macau into national development. It has shown that some of the issues highlighted are new to the Zhang Jun SPC presidency, while many others are perennial, and still others are considered less important than before. In contrast to earlier reform plan outlines, the foreign experience is less important in this one; but the implementation of specific provisions of the Sixth Reform Plan Outline will require careful consideration of international as well as non-Chinese legislation and judicial practices. By the way it stresses Party leadership, by the governance role it assigns to courts, and in its coordination with Party and state institutions, the Sixth Reform Plan Outline gives the impression that the Chinese judiciary is charting its own course. But it also illustrates instances of commonality with other legal systems. Judicial credibility and fairness remain concerns. Observers in and out of China will be carefully monitoring whether the Sixth Reform Plan Outline will make a difference, and how.