The Struggle for Socialism in China: The Bo Xilai Saga and Beyond :: Monthly Review

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From Tahrir Square to Wall Street, from Athens to Montreal, dreams of emancipation are mobilizing a new wave of revolts all over the world. Simultaneously the forces of repression are being unleashed everywhere to impose “new mechanisms of social control” with the aim of establishing “new conditions for achieving surplus value” in the aftermath of a protracted capitalist economic crisis. Some anticipated a Chinese popular uprising following the Arab Spring. Instead, since spring 2012 the world has seen a sensational drama of elite struggle surrounding the ousting of the Chongqing head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Politburo member Bo Xilai, including a crackdown on his Chongqing Model of development. Even though the CCP has been able to contain large-scale social unrest, divisions amongst the elite became a focal point of political struggle during this dangerous year of power transition in China.

The ousting of Bo was so significant that it has widely been described as a political earthquake of a magnitude rivaling the downfall of Mao’s designated heir Lin Biao in 1971 or the crackdown in 1989. Bo was no ordinary CCP Politburo member, and the Chongqing Model was not just another instance of the “decentralized experimentation” so characteristic of the CCP’s policy-making process. What was increasingly at issue, and was emphasized by the press, was the contrast between two models of development: the “Guangdong Model” and the “Chongqing Model.” Guangdong symbolized a more free market approach, rising inequality, and an export orientation. Chongqing was characterized as looking to revitalize socialist ideas and populist claims in its push for rapid and balanced growth. At stake today, then, is not just the fate of Bo, but also China’s revolutionary past, the complicated intersections of domestic and transnational class politics, and the unfinished struggle for socialism in China.

China’s left-leaning online voices have characterized Bo’s ouster—labeled the “3.15 coup” because it was carried out on March 15—as an attempt waged by his opponents at the CCP central leadership not only to prevent him from possibly assuming a powerful position at the next Politburo Standing Committee, but also to suppress the potential for a more egalitarian shift in China’s developmental path. For their part, right-wingers have accused Bo and his allies of attempting to stage a coup to seize national power and of wanting to return China to the dark days of the Cultural Revolution. The actual developments, of course, are much more complicated and messier than these simple accusations of coup and counter-coup.

The basic story line of the Bo saga is well-known. On February 6, 2012, shortly before Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping was due to visit the United States, Wang Lijun, Bo’s right-hand man and Chongqing’s famed gang-busting former police chief, attempted to seek political asylum in the U.S. consulate in Chengdu. After intensive negotiations among the relevant authorities, Wang was taken by central Chinese security authorities to Beijing. At a press conference in Beijing on March 9, Bo accepted responsibility for Wang but vigorously defended his experiments in Chongqing. On March 14, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao openly reprimanded Bo’s Chongqing leadership, accusing it of trying to revive the Cultural Revolution. On March 15, Bo was dismissed as the CCP Chongqing Secretary without official explanation. Then, at 11:00 PM on April 10, China’s official media delivered what is known as the “midnight fright” in the Bo saga by announcing that he had been stripped of his memberships in the CCP Central Committee and its Politburo. Signifying the CCP central leadership’s attempt
to cover up any fundamental political division, Bo was said to have been put under investigation for “serious violations of disciplines,” while his wife Gu Kailai was under detention on suspicion of murdering Neil Heywood, described as a “British businessman” who had close connections with Bo’s wife and son. On August 9, 2012, in a tightly controlled court case that was perceived to be a political show trial that has left many unanswered questions, Bo’s wife Gu Kailai was tried for Heywood’s murder and found guilty. On August 20, Gu received a suspended death sentence.

Other than waging an unprecedented propaganda campaign to rally the whole nation behind the central leadership in the immediate aftermath of the April 10 announcements, China’s state media made no further announcements in the evolving Bo saga until the tightly controlled official news about the legal proceedings against his wife. In fact, the system deliberately tried to manufacture a bout of national amnesia about it throughout much of the summer. Meanwhile, for a sustained period throughout spring and a good part of summer 2012, the “rumor machine” surrounding the case operated in high gear outside China and through the cracks in the “Great Firewall of China.”

Leading Anglo-American news outlets such as the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the Financial Times, and the Daily Telegraph—along with Falun Gong media and right-wing overseas Chinese-language websites such as the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy-funded Boxun.com—published lurid tales of corruption and intrigue against Bo: from secretly wire-tapping Hu Jintao to illegally funneling massive funds abroad, from engaging in dangerous liaisons with high-level military officers to colliding with high-flying business tycoons. Given the opaque nature of the case, it raises the question: How much of the information would have come directly from CCP insiders? What is the level of collaboration between Chinese, U.S., and British authorities in this ostensibly “Chinese” political drama at a time when it has become more important than ever for the state managers of these countries to co-manage the crisis-ridden global political economy? Now that an apparent political struggle has been reframed as sensational murder case, what’s next?

Rather than dwelling on the details, many of which will likely remain obscure for some time, this article foregrounds the historical context and the political content of the Chongqing Model. The model inspired hope among the disenfranchised and provoked fear among the beneficiaries of China’s reforms. It at once embodied sincere, distorted, and perhaps even perverted fragments of a project of “socialist renewal” in post-reform China. On the one hand, an extraordinary alliance of Anglo-American capitalist media and right-wing Chinese language media and bloggers have portrayed Bo as being corrupt, dangerous, opportunistic, and cynical. On the other hand, some on the left would question the very notion of socialism in China to begin with. The struggle for socialism in China has been virtually absent from the great mélange of news coverage and commentaries on the case so far. Nevertheless, this struggle constitutes the most crucial part of the story. The intriguing and complex communicative politics around the Bo saga is highly symptomatic of ongoing domestic and international battles over the future of China. The underlying drama, therefore, is larger than Bo, and larger even than the Chongqing Model.

Chongqing and the Dialectic of China’s Reform

If Mao Zedong Thought once served as the hegemonic ideology of China’s pursuit of socialism in the twentieth century, two of Deng Xiaoping’s slogans, “letting some people get rich first” and “development is ironclad truth,” have served as the most powerful ideological justifications for China’s post-Mao developmental path. Given that this path has transformed China from one of the most egalitarian societies in the world under Mao to one of the most unequal in the contemporary world, it is not surprising then that few have taken the CCP’s claim of building “socialism with Chinese characteristics” seriously. However, for many Chinese, the lived experiences of socialism—both positive and negative—are real, and so are the contemporary contradictions between rhetoric and reality. Despite Deng’s “no debate” decree—that is, there should be no debate about whether the post-Mao reforms are capitalistic or socialist—overt and covert struggles over the direction of China’s reform path, its internal contradictions, and variegated social conflicts have compelled the CCP leadership to continue to claim the mantra of socialism on the one hand, while
As early as 2003, the CCP had modified Deng’s development doctrine to promote the so-called “scientific concept of development”—that is, a more people-centric, and socially and ecologically sustainable developmental path. By October 2007, the CCP’s 17th National Congress had officially committed itself to “accelerate the transformation of the mode of economic development.” The global financial crisis that erupted in 2008 has not only injected new energy to calls for “socialist renewal” as the only viable alternative to further capitalistic reintegration, but also compelled the leadership to intensify its rhetoric about shifting Chinese development away from a GDP-driven and exported-oriented model. However, a powerful hegemonic bloc of transnational capital, domestic coastal export industries, and pro-capitalist state officials—as well as neoliberal media, intellectual leaders, and their middle class followers—continues to block any substantial efforts at reorienting the Chinese developmental path.

It is within this context that Chongqing, under Bo’s leadership, must be understood as a place that made substantial efforts to pursue a more socially sustainable developmental path. Previously a municipality of Sichuan province, Chongqing gained provincial jurisdiction status in 1997. With a huge rural population (70 percent of 32 million in 2010) and a rugged geography in China’s southwest interior, Chongqing is a microcosm of China. It not only faces some of the country’s most profound socioeconomic challenges but also manifests all the pitfalls of neoliberal capitalist reintegration, including a criminalized economy. In late 2007, Bo, who had gained local governance experience first in the city of Dalian and then in Liaoning province prior to becoming China’s Minister of Commerce in 2003, was sent to lead Chongqing as its party secretary.

Chongqing still prides itself as China’s wartime capital and a center of global anti-fascist struggles between 1937 and 1946. It was turned “red” by literally soaking in the blood of Communist martyrs in the fierce struggles between the Communists and the Nationalists around the time of the PRC’s founding in 1949. Later, Chongqing was built into one of China’s Cold War–era major inland military-industrial bases. This cultivated a strong working class, who had been on the forefront of anti-privatization struggles until the mid–2000s. As China’s newly established metropolis during the reform era, Chongqing shouldered some of the heaviest social dislocations burdening China’s post-Mao development and modernization, with not only the resettlements of Three Gorges Dam migrants but also the care of the elderly and the children left behind in depressed rural villages by migrant workers moving to the coastal regions. Partly because of this, since 1997 the central authorities have given Chongqing more leeway to experiment with integrating urban and rural development. Bo, an ambitious, charismatic, and strong-willed “red princeling” (he is the son of a revolutionary leader) who had a significant power base among China’s political and military elites, was trying to reclaim China’s revolutionary legacies to win popular support in a bid to return to Beijing for a higher political office. This particular configuration of socio-historical, geopolitical, as well as biographical forces gave rise to the Chongqing Model.

The model’s cornerstones were an enlarged public sector and a focus on social welfare. As an August 8, 2012 Foreign Policy article put it, it was “a daring experiment in using state policy and state resources to advance the interests of ordinary people, while maintaining the role of the party and state.” Specifically, the local state significantly enlarged its role in the economy through the creation of eight major investment firms that operated as marketized entities but served the purpose of equitable development. Similarly, a state investment firm, rather than private capital, took control of the massive “poor assets” of more than 1,160 state-owned enterprises from the Mao era, restructured them, and developed them into viable businesses. As a result, Chongqing’s state-owned assets grew exponentially. Chongqing took aggressive steps in bridging the urban-rural gap, enabling as many as 3.22 million rural migrants to settle in the city with urban citizenship entitlements in employment, retirement pensions, public rental housing, children’s education, and health care. Beginning in 2009, under a program known as 10 Points on People’s Livelihood, Chongqing spent more than half of all government expenditures on improving public welfare, particularly the livelihoods of workers and farmers.

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In these ways, Chongqing put into practice the CCP's slogan of pursuing people-centered development. In fact, there was nothing radical in these policies—if they were measured against official rhetoric. The effort to strengthen the public sector, for example, remains consistent with China's constitutional commitment to build a “socialist” system based on the primacy of public ownership. Rather than oppose capitalist reintegration, Chongqing aggressively courted global capital. For example, in a plan to build Chongqing into Asia’s largest manufacturing center for notebook computers, transnational corporations from HP to Acer were attracted to establish operations there. Bo’s leadership even lured the super-exploitative IT manufacturer Foxconn to relocate 200,000 of its 500,000 Shenzhen jobs to Chongqing. However, there was a key difference. In Shenzhen, Foxconn was allowed to disembed itself from society by forcing workers to live in factory-supplied, military-barrack-style dorms. In contrast, Chongqing provided cheap public rental housing to Foxconn workers. This allowed it to break away from the “global labor arbitrage” pattern and re-embed transnational capital in society. Meanwhile, in an effort to solve the employment problem, Chongqing implemented a massive microenterprise program to support rural migrants and university graduates to establish businesses in the urban areas. In short, as Philip Huang observed, the Chongqing Model attempted to find a way that allows the complementary growth of state, transnational, and domestic private sectors in a mixed economy.

Waving the Flag of Common Prosperity

Meanwhile, Bo, in a move that was highly counterintuitive to liberal expectations for political liberalization, reinvigorated the Maoist practice of mass line political communication in an attempt to reign in the CCP bureaucracy and capture the hearts and minds of Chongqing’s residents. The core concept is “common prosperity.” In a 2011 speech, Bo, citing Hu Jintao, argued that “common prosperity” is what defines the “advanced direction” of a communist culture:

The polarization of rich and poor is the backward culture of slave owners, feudal lords and capitalists, while common prosperity is the people’s just and advanced culture. The Western culture from the British bourgeois revolution in 1640 has had a history of more than 370 years. They often championed the slogans of “freedom, democracy, equality, and fraternity.” However, they have never mentioned “common prosperity”—a topic that concerns the fundamental interests of the vast majority of humanity. Only the communists, with their down-to-earth materialist courage and selfless spirit, write “common prosperity” on their own flag. As comrade Hu Jintao proclaimed at the CCP’s 90th anniversary conference, we must steadfastly pursue the path of common prosperity! We firmly believe, sooner or later, the whole humanity will take on the road of common prosperity.

Furthermore, Bo argued that “common prosperity” is not just an ideal or an end point; rather it is the motivating force that runs through the entire developmental process. Just as neoliberal reformers have selectively cited Deng to justify class polarization, Bo cited the Deng who warned against the danger of the reform taking on the “evil path” of capitalism if it had created social polarization and engendered a new capitalist class. Bo even modified Deng’s developmental doctrine to argue that “the people’s livelihood is the ironclad truth.” Against those who continued to espouse the neoliberal “trickle down” theory by pitting “making the cake” against “dividing the cake,” Bo insisted that these two aims can be mutually reinforcing. Most significantly, he argued that the CCP could not wait for too long before dealing with the problem of social polarization, because then vested interests would be too powerful and it would be no longer possible to make any change. Speaking to the central leadership’s overriding concern with social harmony, Bo maintained that it was not the result of “control”; rather, only common prosperity would serve as the soil that nurtures the fruits of social harmony.

Bo implemented a whole range of governmental measures aiming at reestablishing the CCP’s organic links with the grassroots. First, he launched a massive anti-corruption and anti-organized crime campaign—known as Striking Black—to reign in the city’s underground economy. In the West, “law and order” as a governmental strategy is commonly associated with the political right; however, to the extent that this campaign aimed at the intertwined forces of party-state officials, private businesses, and criminals, the campaign decidedly manifested a left-leaning class politics. Moreover, because organized crime and its associated underground economy had permeated economic activities crucial to everyday life—as mundane as taking a taxi and riding a
bus—the campaign, by making Chongqing safe, literally reclaimed the city’s public space for the ordinary people. As a result, it gained wide popularity. Further, because the campaign actively solicited reports of criminal activities from members of the public, it contained a Maoist “mass participation” and revolutionary justice dimension.13

The other prong of Bo’s effort at reestablishing the CCP’s organic links with the grassroots involved a whole series of institutionalized communication and problem-solving practices. One set, initiated in 2008, involved the “three institutions” of “party secretary receiving visits, party committee members making visits, and providing regular feedback to public complaints.” First, the head of a village or urban community CCP Committee must receive public visits for half a day each week to hear public concerns. Second, members of the village or urban community CCP Committee must make two visits to rural or urban households to solicit opinions on government policies and address issues and concerns; third, open lines of communication between the Party Secretary and the public must be established through opinion boxes, emails, and telephone hotlines; feedback must be provided within a given time frame. Shortly thereafter, another set of practices was initiated in 2009. Among them, the “three going into’s and three togethernesses” compelled officials to eat together, live together, and work together with the peasants for extended periods. The “big visitation down” reversed the widespread phenomenon of “visitation above” all over China—that is, when individuals, groups, or even entire villages appeal to higher level authorities, in person or in writing, to seek redress for grievances. Finally, in an attempt to connect officials with the rural poor, officials were required to each “adopt a poor relative”—visiting the family at least twice a year and doing something for them as one might with a relative.

Although such bureaucratic mobilization against bureaucratic alienation from the public “no doubt breeds its own formalistic excess,”14 to the extent that these measures aimed at addressing the universal problems of representation and accountability, a case could be made that the ways they were reinstated in Chongqing appeared more substantive than Western politicians’ constituency visits and photo-ops during election campaigns. Underscoring the point that there are different modes of democracy, Bo’s Chongqing leadership framed these measures as concrete embodiments of “people’s democracy.”

Singing Red and Reclaiming the Revolution

Promoted as the soft side of the iron-fisted Striking Black campaign, Singing Red is the communication and cultural component of the Chongqing Model. Along with staggering social inequality, the collapse of basic social morality and the prevalence of excessive materialistic values have been the widely noted cultural consequences of Deng’s reforms. To be sure, the post-Mao CCP has not stopped championing socialism in rhetoric. For example, following a resolution to strengthen the construction of “socialist spiritual civilization” in 1996, the CCP Central Committee adopted a resolution advocating a “socialist core value system” in 2006. However, in the absence of a coordinated socioeconomic development model that resembles anything like building a socialist society, such campaigns not only sound hollow, but also breed cynicism.

Singing Red is the shorthand for Chongqing’s officially sponsored communication practices aimed at promoting socialist values and uplifting public morality. Launched in 2008, the campaign centered on the communicative acts of singing red songs, reading classics, telling revolutionary and uplifting stories, and texting exhortative maxims. Bo took the lead in these. Moreover, in an act now perceived as part of an attempt to upstage the central leadership, he led a massive Chongqing cultural troupe in staging seven Singing Red performances in Beijing in June 2011. That the CCP happened to celebrate the ninetieth anniversary of its founding in 2011 and that there are significant voices inside China defending the CCP’s socialist legacy had certainly worked in Bo’s favor.

Among China’s post-Mao liberal media and intellectual elite, the mere description of these Singing Red activities invokes a knee-jerk reaction against the “revival of the Cultural Revolution.” It was precisely drawing upon this reaction that Wen unleashed his critique of Chongqing. However, the range of content in the Singing Red campaign was actually quite broad. It drew from a wide array of musical styles, literary texts, and
maxims.15 Moreover, the popular roots of Singing Red in post-reform China are undeniable. Since the 1990s, Chinese society—especially disenfranchised social groups—experienced a deep nostalgia for socialist morality. Behind a growing right-wing mentality that espoused the notion of “survival of the fittest” in a neoliberal post-socialist jungle, there existed a profound yearning for social justice, equality, and a sense of community. Underscoring the centrality of lived experience and the power of popular culture, especially popular music, this yearning was most vocally expressed in the voluntary group singing of revolutionary songs in public spaces. Such activities, along with other means of grassroots cultural activities that have been inspired by and made reference to China’s revolutionary past, preceded Bo’s official appropriation of them. As the flourishing of neo-Maoist websites such as Utopia and Mao-flag since the early 2000s underscores, Maoism and the language of socialism within the realm of Chinese cyberspace had long become an ideological weapon of critique against the CCP’s capitalistic reform program. What Bo did, then, was to reappropriate this legacy in the typical CCP mass line fashion of “from the mass, to the mass.”

Here again, it is important to stress the integrated nature of Chongqing’s political-economic and socio-cultural transformation. In fact, without the government’s comprehensive programs aimed at improving people’s livelihood (and all the visible achievements), Singing Red would not have any popular material foundation.16 What Singing Red aimed at achieving was not only a new subjectivity and cultural self-confidence, but also a sense that a better future is possible.

The decommercialization of Chongqing’s nationally available satellite television channel CQTV on March 1, 2011, was the most important media institutional transformation under the Chongqing Model. Like all of China’s provincial satellite television channels, CQTV had previously relied heavily on advertising revenue and was excessively commercial in programming orientation. By stopping commercial advertising at CQTV and financing it with a combination of government revenue and internal cross-subsidy within the Chongqing broadcasting authority (which runs other commercialized channels), Bo’s Chongqing leadership aimed to turn CQTV into a “public interest channel” and a key venue for the promotion of cultural citizenship.17 The decommercialized CQTV rebranded itself with the color “red” and offered a program line-up that included red-song singing performances, revolutionary story-telling, recollections of revolutionary histories, the cultivation of revolutionary faith, and revolutionary literature. The channel also offered a news program entitled People’s Livelihoods, focusing on both local and national news relating to initiatives aiming at people-centered development. While this claim to “red” was based first and foremost on China’s revolutionary traditions, CQTV also claimed “red” as China’s national color. In this way, CQTV aimed to forge a new revolutionary national-popular culture:

“Red culture” in the narrow sense signifies the spirit of the times as forged by the CCP in leading the vast majority of the Chinese people during the period of explosive revolution and war, and during the periods of [socialist] construction, and reform and opening up. China under the CCP leadership is “red China.” In the broad terms, it “[red culture]” not only encompasses all the fine elements of Chinese culture, but also all the cultural fruits created by people all over the world. It is the overall name for advanced and progressive culture.18

In August 2011, CQTV inaugurated the weekly current affairs discussion program Public Forum on Common Prosperity. Centering on the theme of “reducing the three divides [between rich and poor, urban and rural, and coastal and interior regions], promoting common prosperity,” the forty-five-minute program posited itself as a platform on which Chinese political and academic leaders could face squarely the contradictions and conflicts resulting from China’s current uneven development, and respond to the need for theoretical explorations. As anti-neoliberal scholars, who had largely been invisible to other television outlets, became forum guests and put forward their visions for a more equitable and sustainable Chinese developmental path, the provocative effects and historical significance of the program in the Chinese media ecology were not to be underestimated.

To be sure, this was a work in progress. There was a shortage of popular “red” content. The tension between revolutionary and nationalistic claims to “red” remains acute. Bo maintained tight control of the Chongqing media, and CQTV’s programming sometimes betrayed a top-down and didactic orientation.19 However, CQTV,
by championing common prosperity, injected—however briefly—a strong anti-neoliberal perspective into a Chinese symbolic universe that has long been dominated by market reformers. Specifically, by stopping commercial advertising at CQTV, Bo’s Chongqing leadership reclaimed a media channel from the market to serve a new socio-cultural mission. In a December 3, 2011, discussion with CQTV staff and program experts, Bo once again felt compelled to address his detractors for a cause that should have been self-evident in a country that is ostensibly led by a Communist party: “Serving the people is our party’s fundamental principal, and common prosperity is the concrete embodiment of serving the people…in the eyes of some people, ‘going forward’ means learning from the West, while inheriting and promoting the CCP’s fine traditions are regarded as being ‘leftist,’ ‘going backward.’ These remarks are truly odd and strange.”

A Transnational Communication War Over China’s Future

Strange or not, this was exactly the dominant political, media, and intellectual tide that the Chongqing Model had run against. Largely ignoring its attempts at pursuing a more equitable developmental path, liberal intellectuals and market-oriented media outlets expressed considerable hostility toward Bo and the Chongqing experiments from the onset. These critics took for granted economic polarization and dramatized the illiberal orientation of Chongqing’s Singing Red and Striking Black campaign. They viewed them at best as Bo’s hypocritical scheme to use Chongqing as a launching pad for his bid for national power, and at worst an authoritarian populist, even fascist, restoration of the Cultural Revolution. The post-March 15, 2012 transnational and domestic media campaign against Bo in their eyes only confirmed the worst. Now that the struggle against Bo has taken a disciplinary and criminal turn, the mainstream transnational and Chinese media are conveniently able to avoid the class politics of his policies.

Bo posed a challenge to the ideological legitimacy of the CCP central leadership and its succession plan. He threatened to split the CCP by exposing the profound contradictions of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Moreover, what he did in Chongqing undermined vested interests in China’s transnationalized bureaucratic capitalist social formation—even though he had been an integral part of it. His Striking Black campaign terrorized domestic capitalists and their bureaucratic patrons. His aggressive rejuvenation of the mass line undermined bureaucratic privileges and shook up Chongqing’s officialdom. Whether Bo had used the Striking Black campaign to illegally expropriate private property and purge political opponents or not, the campaign uprooted powerful officials and the mafia-style capitalists under their protection. Symbolic of what Chongqing’s sweeping Striking Black campaign ran against, a powerful national alliance of lawyers, legal scholars, and journalists mounted a sustained legal and media mobilization against the Chongqing law and order apparatus under Bo. The worst nightmare for China’s vested money/power/legal establishment would be Bo being put in charge of the country’s law and order apparatuses as a member of the Standing Committee of the next CCP Politburo.

Nor did China’s media community identify with Chongqing’s experiments in media decommercialization. On the one hand, journalists complain about the corrosive impact of commercialization. On the other hand, they do not identify their own economic and professional interests with a decommercialized media system. In fact, decommercialization at CQTV had sent a chilly message to journalists that they could lose a main portion of their income (apart from their state-allocated salary, Chinese journalists derive the main chunk of their income from media organizations’ commercial revenues). Not surprisingly, one of the earliest stories regarding the post-Bo “restoration” in Chongqing was about the immediate reinstatement of advertising at CQTV.

Chongqing has been turned into the focal point of struggles over the future of China as the CCP prepares itself for a once-in-a-decade leadership transition at its 18th National Congress this fall. While radical liberal intellectuals have advocated regime change and the end of one-party rule, many still try to compel the CCP to live up to its revolutionary promise and uphold the Chinese socialist constitution. The Chongqing Model has been so influential and so controversial precisely because these changes have been achieved within the existing party-state framework and by appealing to the rhetoric of socialism. Bo’s experiments undermined the
neoliberal “end of history” design and demonstrated that the CCP, with political will, might still have the potential to reconnect itself with its historical workers-peasants power base. While there was no lack of left critiques of the Chongqing Model from the beginning, for Chinese social forces that have struggled for a socialist future, the possibility of the Chongqing Model being promoted at the national level seemed to be a key step toward a left turn of the CCP. For those at Utopia who had championed “socialist renewal,” Bo’s policies represented a progressive direction within the CCP, while the Chongqing Model was the only hope for China to avoid yet another violent revolution.

Starting with the outbreak of the “Wang Lijun incident” on February 6, 2012, the communication war over Chongqing reached an unprecedented level of intensity in a transnationalized and increasingly online-driven media sphere. Right-wing overseas Chinese websites, Falun Gong media, Western government-sponsored broadcasters such VOA and BBC, and mainstream Western press outlets were quick to spread all kinds of rumors and uncorroborated information to the detriment of Bo and the Chongqing Model. The darkest characterization of Bo came from Jiang Weiping, a former Hong Kong journalist once jailed under Bo’s jurisdiction in Liaoning province, who now lives in Canada and offers his views to reputable Canadian news outlets such as the CBC’s As It Happens. According to Jiang, Bo wasted 270 billion yuan in public funds in his Singing Red campaign. He manufactured more than 600 “black societies” for his Striking Black campaign. He robbed more than 100 billion yuan of assets out of private enterprises. He threw several thousand entrepreneurs into jail and drove out thirty thousand more without any regard for law and procedure. He inflicted a “psychological collapse of the gotten-rich-first middle class,” and much more. As Lin Chun observed, the “alliance of a Communist leadership, rightwing anti-Communist factions inside and outside China (including Falun Gong), and western governments and the press” in the Bo saga has turned it into “a phenomenal example of 21st-century postmodern politics.” As of early September 2012, the CCP has not disclosed any evidence of Bo’s wrongdoings. However, with what individuals like Jiang and transnational media outlets have done, in addition to the state media’s carefully scripted reporting of Bo’s wife’s murder trial, perhaps the CCP does not have to provide any charges against Bo himself at all. Nevertheless, and perhaps precisely because of all these unofficial reports, how to put an official closure to the Bo case remains perhaps the most thorny issue for the CCP in the final months leading up to its 18th National Congress this fall. That the CCP still has not announced the dates of the congress as of early September 2012 keeps everybody on the edge.

Leftist websites recognized the negative impact of the Wang Lijun-Bo Xilai saga would have on the socialist cause but still expressed faith in it. For a brief period at the beginning of the saga, they also unleashed their share of attacks in the ongoing communication war, from commentaries that openly supported Bo and attacked Wen, to all kinds of conspiracy theories. Not surprisingly, by late March and early April the CCP had made the closure of Utopia and other leftist websites a key part of its campaign to purge Bo and to control communication about the case. This has allowed the CCP to suppress any potential role of the leftist websites in mobilizing the masses for a showdown over the future of China.

Leading Anglo-American press outlets, after having played such a pivotal role in shaping the Bo saga, are capitalizing on their growing prominence in relation to Chinese political communication at the same time they are facing profound crisis in the home markets and social struggles against the imposition of economic austerity are intensifying in the heartlands of global capitalism. On June 28, 2012, the Chinese-language website of the New York Times went live, aspiring to become a “vigorous competitor” of the existing Chinese-language websites of the Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal for “luxury advertising aiming at the country’s growing affluent class.” Notwithstanding the Chinese state’s firewall, the New York Times’ foreign editor Joseph Kahn said of the new venture, “We hope and expect that Chinese officials will welcome what we’re doing.”

Meanwhile, the Chinese state continues to suppress domestic left-leaning communication. Most of the content on Utopia remains suspended, and left-leaning online voices associated with the website are trying to find new
communication platforms to reflect upon the Bo saga and to regroup themselves. Some of the focal point of discussions involved whether the website had been “hijacked” by radical Maoist writers and whether it had made a fatal strategic mistake by identifying itself too closely with Bo and, by extension, by vesting any hope in members of the ruling elite at all.

China’s Uncertain Future

After offering a devastating critique of China’s export-oriented development model in the reform era and its global implications, John Bellamy Foster and Robert McChesney wrote in a February 2012 *Monthly Review* article: “For the *New York Times*, nothing but ‘Mao’s resurrection or nuclear cataclysm’ is likely to arrest China’s current course. Yet, if what is meant by ‘Mao’s resurrection’ is the renewal in some way of the Chinese Revolution itself—which would necessarily take new historical forms as a result of changing historical conditions—the potential remains, and is even growing under current conditions.”

Bo is certainly no resurrected Mao. But this has not prevented the *New York Times*, along with its oligopolistic Anglo-American media competitors, from aggressively joining the transnational media feeding frenzy that hastened Bo’s downfall. As China is playing an increasingly important role in creating “the new conditions for achieving surplus value” in a crisis-laden global capitalist economy, the prospects for a fundamental reorientation of the Chinese developmental path to achieve greater balance between domestic consumption and exports, and greater equality across classes, regions, and other socioeconomic divides in the short run appear dim. Among other new conditions, this entails “a fundamental political realignment that shifts the balance of power from the coastal urban elite to forces that represent rural grassroots interests.”

Essentially, this would mean the realization of what the Chinese state aspires to be in its constitution—that is, a “people’s democracy” led by the working class and counting as its political backbone “the alliance of workers and peasants”—a phrase that has virtually been forgotten in a reform era that champions the creation of the “middle class.”

However, to the extent that Bo was able to go so far in Chongqing and that his ousting has created such a grave political crisis, the CCP could not easily bury his political messages and brush aside the underlying issues that the Chongqing Model tried to address. If the CCP wants to stay in power, it has to balance the worrisome question of social instability against a faltering global economy—all the while living up to some of the rhetoric contained in the Chongqing Model. It is perhaps precisely within this context that one can appreciate the front page layout of the April 11, 2012, *People’s Daily*. Rather than lead with the bombshell announcements about Bo’s ousting, it led with the following: “More than 200,000 Shaanxi Officials Going to the Grassroots.” Since no other region has done a more impressive job in sending officials to attend the grassroots than Bo’s Chongqing, the party line was clear: “Down with Bo Xilai, Long Live the Mass Line!”

Whether the ousting of Bo represents “the last milestone in the Chinese path of negating socialism” remains to be seen. However, among the many ironic anomalies this saga uncloaks so far are: in a political system that does not allow open campaigning and genuine competition for the highest political offices, Bo single-handedly launched such a campaign on the basis of a well-articulated political platform and a popular socioeconomic program; moreover, he had become popular not by championing the values of liberal democracy, but by reinvigorating the theories and practices of the Chinese Communist revolution; and lastly, though China’s liberals and neoliberals have long cried out for Western-style political competition and freedom of communication, their victory in quashing Bo relied on the Chinese state’s massive clampdown on leftist media and communication. A final, and ultimately more serious, question remains: Will the removal of Bo as a contender for national power and the concomitant suppression of leftist communication make China safe at last for the kind of “political reform” that will secure China as a haven for global capitalism?

Postscript

The Bo Xilai saga is reaching its end game after this article went to press in early September. Since then
domestic Chinese official media have taken over the transnational “rumor machine” and have become the monopoly information source of official verdicts on the case. On September 24, 2012, state media reported that the Chengdu Intermediate People’s Court had handed Wang Lijun a fifteen-year jail sentence for the crimes of defection, accepting bribes, power abuse, and bending the law for selfish ends. On September 28, state media reported on the CCP’s official verdict on Bo Xilai: he had been expelled from the CCP and will face criminal justice for the accused crimes of corruption, abuse of power, bribe-taking, and improper relations with women. With the façade of unity created by the conclusion of its investigation on Bo, the CCP finally set to open its 18th National Congress on November 8, 2012. Apart from the spectacle of the party congress itself, the grand finale to the entire Bo saga will be his court trial. Although the tightly scripted court cases resulting from the saga are aimed at reinforcing both discourses of law and order and the CCP’s strong anti-corruption stand, it seems clear that the class realities and political struggles that have intercut this entire saga will remain key features of China’s unfolding history. Instead of tarnishing and even burying the cause of socialism once more in China, the ending of the Bo saga may open up other new avenues to the Chinese struggle for socialism, for which popular control of the Chinese political economy will be a defining feature.

—September 28, 2012

Notes


4. Bo and the Chongqing official discourse did not use the term Chongqing Model.

5. For more detailed analysis in the English scholarly literature see Modern China 37, no. 6 (November 2011), a special issue dedicated to the discussion of the Chongqing Model.


9. Huang, “Chongqing.”


11. Ibid.


13. Ibid, 603.


15. Ibid, 606.


18. Ibid.


20. These comments were reported by Xiao Zhu and posted on the CQTV website. However, the story is no longer accessible on the Chinese Internet.


27. Lin, “China’s Leaders Are Cracking Down on Bo Xilai and His Chongqing Model.”