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By Duncan Hewitt

It was just like old times—in many of China’s major newspapers, a prominently displayed half-page story headlined: “Officials and citizens all across the country express unwavering support for central party leadership’s decision.” It followed hot on the heels of the previous day’s *People’s Daily* headline: “Resolutely support the party’s correct decision,” which appeared on many front pages. In the wake of the stunning news that Bo Xilai, one of China’s most prominent politicians, had been suspended from the ruling Politburo, and his wife arrested on suspicion of being involved in the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood, the Chinese Communist Party was in full damage limitation mode. And as so often in a time of crisis, it reverted to tried and trusted methods—in this case wheeling out headlines and slogans straight out of the Mao-era propaganda lexicon. Even the well-known liberal Guangzhou newspaper the *Southern Weekend* had obviously been ordered to fill its front page with them—though it did manage to squeeze in a recent quote from Premier Wen Jiabao calling for continuing reforms. And by the end of the week, state media had begun pushing other default buttons, with an editorial in the often nationalistic *Global Times* newspaper accusing the western media of trying to use the affair to split the Communist Party.

But of course times have, in fact, changed. “These headlines are like something out of the Cultural Revolution,” said one very modern urban intellectual, shaking his head in disbelief. And while newspaper editors have apparently been summoned to meetings to ensure they follow the correct line, the authorities have had to work hard policing the Internet against critical comment in recent days. Even before the latest news broke, they had already felt they had no option but to close down the comment function on China’s two biggest microblogging sites for several days, claiming that this was to prevent the spread of rumors, following online speculation about a possible coup attempt by people sympathetic to Mr. Bo. Last week they again blocked the use of (and searches for) the names of Bo Xilai, Neil Heywood, and Wang Lijun, Mr. Bo’s former police chief in the city he ran, Chongqing, whose flight to the US consulate in nearby Chengdu in February was the first hint of the affair.

Yet many people have sought ways to get around the blockade, using abbreviations and homonyms. And opinions are clearly less unified than the official media would seek to have the nation believe. For all that newspapers like the *Global Times* ran headlines suggesting that the detention of a member of the party’s inner circle, apparently in connection with a murder investigation, [was a stirring symbol of the party’s commitment to the rule of law](#), cynics on the Internet were busy suggesting that it was, in fact, a sign of just how rotten the upper echelons of the party appear to have become. Others, even some who did not necessarily sympathize with the campaigns to promote traditional socialist culture which Mr. Bo ran in Chongqing—which seemed to alarm some people in the central leadership—were suspicious, rightly or wrongly, that

his ouster should have come just as he was apparently getting close to an even more powerful post in China's leadership transition later this year.

In a nation where the media has, despite ongoing official controls on the most sensitive political issues, continued to diversify over recent years, and where the Internet and in particular microblogs have revolutionized the flow of information, it's now much harder to control public opinion. In Shanghai, for example, where the city's former Communist Party secretary Chen Liangyu was ousted in 2006, and later convicted on charges of corruption relating to misuse of the city's pension funds, it's not hard to find people who argue that Mr. Chen was in fact a good man who put the city's population first, and claim that his dismissal had more to do with political clashes with the central leadership than any unusual degree of corruption. (And these contrarian attitudes relate to a case which occurred several years before there were microblogs to send such views shooting around cyberspace.)

Some people are undoubtedly glad to see the removal of Mr. Bo, whose populist approach sat awkwardly with the cautious, consensual style of China's top leadership over recent years. And many liberals in China certainly welcomed Premier Wen Jiabao's warning, at his press conference in March, that the country had to be on guard to prevent a return to the days of the Cultural Revolution—an apparent reference to Mr. Bo's Maoist-inspired mass campaigns in Chongqing. It was one of the first times in many years that a top leader had mentioned the Cultural Revolution, serious debate about which still remains almost taboo in China.

Nevertheless, the government's heavy-handed, traditional-style management of the media—and Internet—during this crisis has made some wonder just how far the Communist Party has moved from its Mao-era traditions. Well-known liberal scholar Liu Junning last week wrote a post (which was quickly deleted, [according to Hong Kong University's China Media Project](#)) warning that the greatest threat to social stability was in fact autocratic rule—an apparent reference to the Party itself.

It's all added to the sense that, for all its talk of embracing “public scrutiny” via the Internet, the Party is struggling to keep up with the pace of social change in China. It recently revived a campaign to promote the example of Lei Feng, an early 1960s' soldier promoted by Chairman Mao as a model of altruism—and a throwback to the days when people in China really did “express unwavering support” for the decisions of the party central committee.

But even in the same Shanghai newspapers that hailed public enthusiasm for the government's handling of the latest events last week, there was a reminder of just how much times have changed. Several papers reported how twenty airline passengers, furious at having been delayed overnight at Shanghai's Pudong International Airport when a flight was cancelled—and at receiving no compensation for their troubles—burst past security guards and blocked a runway near the plane they were eventually due to leave on, forcing one international flight that had just landed to change its course on the taxi way. The protesters were soon removed from the runway, but [to the anger of some local media](#), the authorities were apparently initially unwilling to take any further action against them (though after much media criticism, they were later reported to have been given unspecified “administrative punishment.”)

It's perhaps not surprising: with Chinese people increasingly aware of their rights as consumers—and, perhaps, as citizens too—these days, protests by passengers angry at shoddy treatment by state-run airlines (many of which still seem to hanker for the unaccountable days of old) have become commonplace, and [the police are often very wary of intervening for fear of provoking a violent reaction](#). (I saw such a case myself at Shanghai's Hongqiao Airport a couple of weeks ago, when a passenger furious at the cancellation of his flight due to fog leapt onto the counter of an airline desk and began screaming at the top of his voice. Two young policemen hovered nervously nearby, watching but taking no action.) These days, it seems, achieving total unity of opinion among people who feel increasingly empowered as individuals may not be quite as easy as it was in the days when the *People's Daily* first wrote such headlines.

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