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[How Chongqing People View Bo Xilai](#)

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By Xujun Eberlein

One April day in my birth city of Chongqing, I encountered a rare quarrel in People's Park. The park is one of several places in downtown Chongqing that offer low-cost "baba cha" (open-space tea), where retirees and others with time on their hands lounge under leafy banyan trees with their teacups and bird cages for a good part of the day. Two fiftyish men sat at a plastic table drinking tea and chatting about Bo Xilai, their city's ousted leader. One of the men said that Bo's promotion of "people's livelihood" had been a fake show, because during his four-year rule, prices of meat, food, and other daily goods had risen steeply in Chongqing. Two young women, who happened to be nearby, cellphones in hand and apparently waiting for someone, did not like what they heard and started to argue that Bo made Chongqing better. The man got very upset; his face reddened and he raised his voice, which attracted the attention of onlookers, including me. I asked the man whether his criticism was formed after Bo's downfall. He was insulted. "This has always been my opinion! I'm not brainless, I was once a journalist!" he yelled.



Tea-drinkers in People's Park, Chongqing

This scene is rare because, seemingly illogically, in the weeks since his downfall, Bo's local dissenters have been much quieter than his supporters.

Chongqing people's attitudes toward Bo Xilai range from supportive to condemnatory to "who cares" and everything in between, a broad spectrum with two heavy ends. (For the indifferent, a typical expression I often heard was "The gods fighting is none of our business.") So far, however, foreign journalists seem to have a hard time penetrating the famous fog of the river-mountain city to find more than one stratum of views. In the English media it is easy to see headlines such as ["Bo Xilai Still Admired Locally in China"](#) and ["Bo Xilai Remains Popular in Megacity He Once Oversaw."](#) In those reports quoting "the average people on the street," the term "average people" generally does not include intellectuals, writers, journalists, academics, and so forth.

In fact, among local intellectuals, professionals, and the middle class, there has been an overwhelming sentiment against Bo's doings in Chongqing since 2009, according to a dozen such men and women I have spoken to this month, all of whom requested anonymity. One reason their opinions have not been widely reflected in the foreign media is that they are much more reluctant to speak than the "stick men" (棒棒, or porters-for-hire) who roam the streets. When I asked why they were still afraid of speaking up even after Bo was gone, a local journalist told me that the government had issued orders forbidding them from talking to foreign journalists.

There is a long tradition in China of intellectuals being more tightly controlled than any other social class. Their present silence reflects a deep distrust of the government regardless of its position. Though Bo is now officially on the outs, it is still safer not to voice one's opinions.

A researcher of Chongqing's Cultural Revolution told me that in early April, within two hours of talking on the phone with the Chinese assistant of a British journalist and agreeing to have an interview about Bo and the Cultural Revolution, two policemen paid him a visit and requested he cancel the interview, on the grounds that it was a sensitive time and speaking to foreign media would damage Chongqing's image. After turning them down, he was visited by two old ladies representing the "neighborhood committee," who presented the same request. The next day his boss at his work unit talked with him—again urging him to cancel the interview. He wondered how the government found out about the interview and whose phone was monitored: his or the journalist's. To their credit, the researcher told me, all of his uninvited visitors were polite. "At least that is progress."

The local scholars I spoke to view Bo as either a hypocritical opportunist or a ruthless megalomaniac who regards himself as the savior of China, in either case pursuing his own agenda by fair means or foul. Their condemnation of Bo comes down to the bottom line that the system Bo delivered put the ruler's authority above the law. The [billion-dollar ginkgo trees](#), expensive police platforms, and subsidized housing that pleased many were all parts of his "face engineering." My interviewees pointed out that every district of Chongqing is now facing bankruptcy.

Bo's supporters can be most easily found among housewives, retired workers, "stick men," and taxi drivers. One reason that many in the lower-income or laboring classes advocate for Bo is that Bo's violence did not touch them, a university professor said; instead they received small benefits, for which they are grateful. "The poor don't know that Bo looks down on them in his bones," the aforementioned Chongqing journalist said. He gave me an example that once, people

in a poor neighborhood unexpectedly saw their benefactor inspecting the area, and they ran to him to express their thanks, only to be pushed back by Bo's guards. Bo simply turned his back, pretending not to see them.

“Chongqing people are very vain,” a local writer told me, giving another explanation for Bo's popularity. “What made them most happy about Bo is that he dressed the city up with trees and made Chongqing famous. They don't care what system is behind all this. They don't care how much the government is spending. Their logic is that since I don't get to use the money anyway, it is better to waste it on expensive ginkgo trees than drop it in the pockets of corrupt officials.”

Several scholars have pointed out that Bo drew on a common sentiment among lower-income people today: hatred of the rich, hatred of corrupt officials. Bo satisfied them by killing or punishing some of those people; how he did it or whether anyone was wronged does not matter.

The scholars I talked with are not rich—they do not even qualify as middle class according to the commonly accepted definition of “a house and a car.” But they have better access to information than many people who only see Bo's propaganda—for example, the [“five Chongqing”](#) posters, which were still pervasive in the city during my April visit.

One day during my trip, a middle-aged woman sitting behind me in a shared van was talking to another woman about how the police platforms along Chongqing's streets have made the city much safer—a commonly heard praise of Bo—and how criminals would return now that Bo was gone. I asked what she thought about singing red songs. “Those songs purify people's souls,” she answered, as if picking a sentence right from a Party newspaper. “Would you like to go back to the Mao era, then?” I continued to ask. “The Mao era was better than now,” she said, “at least poor patients would be accepted and rescued at an emergency room! Nowadays no one cares if you don't have money.” “But what about the millions of people who starved to death in the great famine?” I had to ask. She replied, “That was a natural disaster!” (The woman is not alone on this—many ordinary people in China are still unaware that the great famine that lasted three years from 1959 to 1961 was mainly caused by Mao's erroneous policies.)

Other fierce advocates of Bo come from the “CCP (Maoist)” group, a small local organization with no more than two or three dozen members—all retired factory workers. They “elected” Bo Xilai (whose consent was not required) as their “general secretary” in [an October 2009 conference](#) at which a number of participants were detained by Bo's government. After Bo's downfall in mid-March of this year, a handful (exaggerated by internet rumors to thousands) of “CCP (Maoist)” members held a protest at Chongqing's riverfront Chaotianmen. A local observer familiar with the incident said that group had tried unsuccessfully to mobilize ex-Red Guards who had suffered imprisonment and other punishment for their activities during the Cultural Revolution. Those past “heroes,” who remain excluded from China's economic miracle and live in poverty, were disappointed in Bo Xilai after their open letter asking to improve their living condition was ignored.

Bo's supporters and dissenters all believe their side is in the majority, and each side uses very different logic when interpreting the charges against Bo and his wife. Four out of five taxi drivers I spoke to, for example, said they didn't believe that Gu Kailai had murdered Neil

Heywood or that Bo was corrupt and hiding money overseas. “Think about it,” one driver said in a teaching tone. “Gu Kailai is a very smart lawyer, wouldn’t she know the consequences of murder? Bo Xilai’s interest is in politics, would he care about a few bucks? It is just that simple!” Their interpretation is that all the charges are made-up excuses to bring Bo down because Bo is more capable than Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and Xi Jinping. The dissenters, on the other hand, believe Bo is completely capable of murder because he has no regard for the life of someone standing in his way. Curiously, regardless of their stance on the Bo affair, most of those I spoke to suspected that Wang Lijun’s entry into the US consulate was part of a plot to bring Bo down.

The last thing I heard before leaving Chongqing was that Bo has requested a public trial. If this is true, the request is most ironic: Bo himself put numerous people on “public trial” during his “crackdown on gangsters” campaign in 2009-2010 and no witnesses for the defense were allowed in court. A dozen or so of those arrested were hastily executed as results of such trials. In a country without an independent judiciary, there is no reason to expect Bo’s prosecution would be any more evenhanded, and Bo should know this better than anyone. So an interesting question is what his real motive in asking for a “public trial” would be. Presumably, it indicates his extreme self-confidence, a characteristic that has done him much damage to date.

On the other hand, the Party leaders must have known that given the wide divide in public opinion, an open trial would put the Party in hot water. That is probably why Bo has only been charged with a discipline violation, an offense that can be handled completely within the Party.

The public divide reflects two sides of the same coin; it is a social crisis caused by rapid economic development ill-supported by the country’s political system. The purge of Bo Xilai puts China’s ruler—the Communist Party—to another legitimacy test. It will be most interesting to see how the Party comes out of it.

[Xujun Eberlein](#) is the author of an award-winning story collection, [Apologies Forthcoming](#), and the blog [Inside-Out China](#).