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[Behind Bo Xilai's Halo](#)

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By Xujun Eberlein

A longer version of this essay appears at [Inside-Out China](#).

In the wake of Bo Xilai's sudden downfall, shortly after what could be called an online carnival among China watchers—probably more in celebration of a rare, real-life political drama than anything else—international media is changing its tune and beginning to paint a more sympathetic image of Bo than previously reported, by focusing on Chinese people's love of him. Reuters, for example, has a report titled [“In China's Chongqing, dismay over downfall of Bo Xilai”](#) that quotes a working “stick man” (棒棒军, a porter-for-hire) who praises Bo as “a good man” that “made life a lot better here.” *The Telegraph*'s Malcolm Moore (the intrepid reporter who brought Wukan to the world's attention) even went so far as to call Bo [“one of the most loved”](#) officials in China.

Those reports, however, can be misleading if not balanced by a variety of opinions or careful analysis.

China is the most populous country in the world, and Chongqing is the most populous metropolis in China. With that many people, one can find any and all kinds of opinions among them, certainly including the ones quoted above. But when we assess Chinese public opinion about a leader, a crucial factor that should never be forgotten is the opacity of China's politics. Under this condition, there is only so much one can read into either love or hatred of a leader by the masses. Mao was the most loved in the 1950s and 60s, but it was Mao's policies that caused tens of millions of deaths during that period. Deng Xiaoping was one of the most hated during the Cultural Revolution (as “China's second biggest capitalist roader”), but he went on to make China richer with his “reform and opening” policies. As I wrote in [a dual book review](#) of *Mao's Great Famine* and *Tombstone*, an information blackout during the 1959-61 famine had caused millions of peasants to quietly die with no complaints about Mao and the Communist Party. Today, the Internet has greatly increased information accessibility (often in the form of rumors), but that is still largely beyond people at the bottom of the society who struggle to make a daily living, people like the “stick men.”

I have been talking to fellow townfolk throughout Bo's tenure in Chongqing, both in person during my visits and via phone and email. One thing I notice—though this is not to claim that my sample set is statistically significant—is that the more access to information people have, the more negative their opinions of Bo are. (The “stick man” quoted by the Reuters report above provides collateral evidence to my observation—he “said he could not read and did not watch television.”) Age also mattered, with people who had experienced the Cultural Revolution tending to be more suspicious of Bo.

Others' attitudes toward Bo went through a change after the "crackdown on gangsters" campaign began. I noted this in February, 2010, in a blog post titled ["Turning Winds in Chongqing's Crackdown."](#) I am one of those who changed.

Watching my hometown from afar, my first impression of Bo Xilai was rather good. In November 2008, Chongqing's taxi drivers went on strike, the first such occurrence in Communist China. I followed this event online as closely as I could, and was worried that a bloody repression might be inevitable. At the time, Bo had held his post as Chongqing Party chief for less than a year. He was in Beijing when the strike started on a Monday; meanwhile, Chongqing's official media reported arrests of cab drivers. On Thursday, however, after Bo returned to Chongqing, he held a three-hour long televised meeting with representatives of the taxi drivers and citizens to discuss their requests. He appeared fair and open-minded, telling the drivers that their demands were legitimate and their problems would be attended to. He gained their trust and the strike ended peacefully. [As I wrote at the time](#), I was very impressed. I still remember the relief I felt for my townsmen. I thought that Bo was different, and that he might make a difference for Chongqing—perhaps for China, too.

A year later, when the "crackdown on gangsters" began, the taxi strike was deemed to have been organized by "mafia." I visit my home city often and I knew the predicament of the cab drivers was real—so that verdict was enough for me to be alarmed. Where had the sympathetic Bo gone? What was the real purpose of the "crackdown"?

Today I continue to wonder what role the taxi strike played in Bo's decision to start a Cultural Revolution-style campaign, and what he had really felt inside when he appeared as a sympathetic listener to the strikers.

Initially, the crackdown made a positive impression on me as well—like the general public, I was eager to see the corrupt punished. The irony is, later I would be as shocked by the death sentence of Wen Qiang, Chongqing's police chief preceding Wang Lijun, as I was pleased by Wen's arrest at first.

Then came the official attempt to overturn the verdict of the taxi strike. Then came [the Li Zhuang case](#). Then came a dozen death sentences and executions in quick succession—a batch execution, really, with a concentration not seen since the heyday of the Cultural Revolution.

An ex-judge I met last year questioned the legality of Chongqing's crackdown. "There is no such a term as 'mafia' or 'gangsters' in China's criminal law," he told me.

* * *

Another thing I want to mention here is this: on March 8th, during the National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing, Bo Xilai gave a press conference that attracted a big crowd of journalists; lots of questions were asked and answered, but no one brought up the disappearance of a Chongqing delegation member, Zhang Mingyu. Zhang was taken by force from his **Beijing** residence by **Chongqing** police, believed to have been sent by Bo Xilai. Zhang's lawyer tried to reach out to media and netizens through microblogs. I saw reports of Zhang's disappearance on

March 7th and tweeted about it with a bit of shock—this was happening during the NPC, which is supposed to be China’s highest legislative meeting. Would anybody inquire about a violation of the basic rights of its own delegates?

A few foreign media outlets reported Zhang’s lawyer’s calls for help on March 7th. After that, Zhang, and his name, were no longer seen anywhere, as if he had vanished or never even existed. For a week, I searched for his name on the Chinese internet every day. Nothing.

Until March 15th, that is, the day Bo Xilai’s removal was announced. A friend who knew I was concerned with Zhang’s fate sent me a link to a VOC report on Zhang’s release.

He was lucky. Another Chongqing citizen, Fang Hong, disappeared two years ago after calling Bo Xilai “shit,” and was never seen or heard from again.

It is thinking about the helplessness of individuals like those that brings fear to me. I write things like this essay—will I disappear one day when visiting Chongqing? Bo’s departure has made me feel safer.

I have seen Bo Xilai characterized as [a Western-style politician](#), which I find amusing. Bo is a product of China’s political system, pure and simple. His education was Mao worship and he has not transcended it; his ideas are all out of old playbooks; his suffering in his youth—years of unjust imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution—seems to have only made him more cynical and cruel.

China’s political system needs to be reformed in order to prevent bigger crises. So where is the hope? If nobody coming out of the system I grew up in could carve a new path forward, we will probably need to wait for those who grew up after the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution had subsided. Alas, that is a generation raised on crony-capitalism and rampant corruption. Such is the dilemma.

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