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Political Scandal at the End of Ideology? The Mediatized Politics of the

Bo Xilai case

If you visit Sina Weibo every day, you'll think there will be revolution tomorrow; if you go to the farmers' market every morning, you'll think a revolution is not going to happen for another hundred years! (personal interview, Sept. 26, 2011)

I heard the comment above when doing field work in China and it came from an active participant in several Chinese online communities. It struck me as an astute observation of the discrepancy between the online and offline worlds. Much as pundits are eager to detect signs of democratization or even regime change in the lively debates on the Chinese Internet, there are several key factors that stop us from treating online political discussion as an accurate barometer of offline politics. First, there is the state's effort not only to suppress certain discourses online but also to initiate and cultivate others. Censorship goes hand in hand with proactive measures to shape public opinion. Second, media institutions are actively positioning themselves on the ideological spectrum in line with their own interests and operational logic. Sometimes this puts the media in opposition to the government, at other times the media logic coincides with the government agenda. Third, the social stratification in contemporary Chinese society is such that not only is netizens' online discussion highly polemical; the visibility of different social groups is also mediated by their media access and the communication resources they possess. The dynamics between these three interlinking aspects highlight the empirical and theoretical challenges of understanding politics in a mediatized society (Hepp, 2012; Hjarvard, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008), where the media play an increasingly important role in constituting political conflicts and power struggles.

In this article, I use the high-profile Bo Xilai case to illustrate the dialectics of media and politics in contemporary China. The dismissal and trial of the former Chongqing Party Secretary is arguably the most significant Chinese political scandal of recent decades. Some have even compared the magnitude of this ‘political earthquake’ with the downfall of Mao’s designated heir Lin Biao in 1971 or the crackdown on the 1989 student movement (Zhao, 2012b). As the son of a prominent Communist Party (CCP) leader, Bo Yibo, Bo Xilai was in the inner circle of China’s top political elite. Prior to his assignment to Chongqing, Bo had been the Mayor of Dalian, Provincial Governor of Liaoning and Minister of Commerce, with a successful political record. There was wide speculation before his dismissal in March 2012 that Bo would become a member of the Politburo Standing Committee after the 18th Party Congress, which was scheduled to take place later that year. In contrast to most other cases of ousted officials, where media coverage has rarely veered from the basic storyline of the Party ridding itself of yet another bad seed, narratives of the Bo Xilai case were fraught with contradictions and contestation. Not only were international news outlets and Chinese citizens activated in an unprecedented manner to construct various versions of the Bo saga, but even the central leadership used new tactics to exploit global communication networks (Wang, 2012). Yet there has been little academic research interrogating the role of the media in configuring the trajectory of the event. Hence the empirical aim of this article is to unpack the media logic underlying the highly publicized downfall of Bo Xilai. In the meantime, given that studies of mediatized political scandals have so far focused only on Western liberal democratic countries, the Chinese case offers an important critique of the current theorization of ‘power and visibility in the media age’ (Thompson, 2000). I start by explaining some of the similarities and key differences between mediatized politics in the West and in China. This leads to an emphasis on the ideological dimension of media logic that is largely missing from discussions derived from a liberal democratic context. I then analyze the dialectics of

the mediatized ideological struggle and politicized media logic running through the Bo Xilai scandal. In the last section I summarize the theoretical contributions that the Chinese case makes to the study of mediatized politics.

Mediatized political scandal and ideological struggle

For those doing research on the interrelation between media and politics, one of the key themes is how ‘media logic’ shapes the way that politics operates. While Altheide and Snow (1979: 10) briefly define media logic as ‘the process through which media present and transmit information,’ the concept has been further explicated as referring to the storytelling techniques of the mass media, including simplification, polarization, intensification, personalization, visualization, stereotypization and framing (Mazzoleni, 1987; Strömbäck, 2008). Some of these techniques have to do with the technological features of a particular medium, but more importantly they are a series of choices made by media professionals and media institutions in order to sell more of their informational products (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). In fact, many have argued that media logic is essentially the market logic followed by media outlets as commercial enterprises (Landerer, 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009). Such an orientation is often in conflict with the normative role that the mass media are expected to fulfill in a liberal democracy in terms of sustaining rational deliberation on public affairs.

On the other hand, political logic is ‘understood as shaped by the combined forces of three dimensions: polity, policy and politics’ (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014: 383). In other words, political logic is contingent upon the overall political framework in any given country, the incentives to win political power, and the need to initiate policy changes. Needless to say,

the media are a crucial source of information about politics in modern societies. As institutions with a 'huge concentration of symbolic power and of the means to describe the world' (Couldry, 2012: 69), the media, together with their corporate advertisers, have an increasing stake in sustaining what Couldry calls the 'myth of the mediated center,' which provides common reference points for any media users to make sense of the world surrounding them. As Carey (1989: 87) puts it, 'reality is a scarce resource. The fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate and display this resource.' Because of this power, political actors are shaping their actions toward positive media coverage while attempting to control media input and outcomes. If politics is about decision making and policy implementation, the constant attempts by the media to seek profit through grabbing attention undermine this, to say the least.

Thompson argues that the process of media logic seeping into political logic has given rise to mediated political scandals in Western liberal democracies. With regard to the development of the media, sophisticated and ubiquitous modern communication technologies, combined with a changing culture of journalism that is oriented toward investigative reporting, have rendered what Thompson calls 'the mediated visibility of political leaders' particularly important (Thompson, 2000: 108). On the political front, the key shift is that class-based 'ideological politics' is gradually giving way to a 'politics of trust' based on specific policy packages offered by political parties. It is in this context that the individual character of political leaders, rather than their class affiliation, becomes susceptible to disclosure by the media of transgression and wrongdoing.

Moving from North American and Western European contexts to China, what is useful about the discussion outlined above is its emphasis on the institutional and discursive power of the media. Partly because of the strong statist tradition in China and partly because of the Western-centric imagination of an omnipotent Chinese Communist Party (CCP), researchers

tend to perceive the media as on the receiving end of political power. Both in the study of Internet censorship and in the investigation of changing journalistic practices, for example, the behavior of media organizations or media professionals is usually interpreted as first and foremost the *product* of state control and regulation. Studies of mediatized politics in non-Chinese contexts have highlighted the endogenous factors that influence media decisions on whether and how to tell a story, especially the market logic that is fundamental to the economic viability of media institutions. By examining the Bo Xilai scandal as a mediatized event, I want to bring attention to the ways in which the media take part in *producing* the political dynamics of today's China.

Nonetheless, analyzing the Bo Xilai case as a mediatized political scandal requires some reconceptualization of the relationship between media and politics, as well as of the political logic itself in a historicized Chinese context. Studies so far have emphasized the influence of the media on politicians and political campaigns in Western liberal democracies, where the legitimacy of the political regime derives from electoral politics and media institutions enjoy a relatively high level of autonomy. As Downing (1996) points out, a major limitation of Western media theories is that they have evolved from and are used to explain a relatively stable political economy. In countries like China, not only are the actual practices of media institutions and politicians in a more complicated state of flux and hybridity, but the normative orientation of what the media and politics are supposed to achieve is also contested. In terms of contestation over the nature of the regime, Wang Hui (2009: 9) uses the term 'depoliticized politics' to characterize the CCP's transition from a revolutionary party to a state party, which 'no longer conforms to its past political role, but becomes a component of the state apparatus.' As the boundary between the political elite and the owners of capital becomes increasingly blurred, the party is changing its class basis. Class-based politics has now been superseded by negotiations around bureaucratic governance.

Wang further argues that the ‘market-ideological apparatuses have a strong depoliticizing character,’ as political divisions between labor and capital, left and right, are replaced by ‘technical disputes about market adjustment mechanisms.’ (p. 13) In contrast, through both his policy agenda and his political rhetoric, which I will explicate in the later section, Bo Xilai invoked the class antagonism and the socialist promise of equality that the central leadership has been carefully containing.

As for media logic, it is also far less settled than what Strömbäck and Esser (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014) summarized as comprising the three dimensions of professionalism, commercialism and media technology. Not to romanticize the autonomy of the media in liberal democracies, the media in China are a more integral component of the ‘ideological apparatuses’ and serve more directly as the mouthpiece of the Party-state. In addition to the issue of heeding the Party line, however, the bottom line of market imperatives is no less, if not more, consequential in shaping the thoroughly commercialized Chinese media institutions. As an affluent, urban middle class emerges as the most desirable target audience, and as access to the media is differentiated on the basis of purchasing power, media commercialization has resulted in social discrimination and social exclusion (Lü & Zhao, 2010; Pan, 2010; Zhao, 2008). By aligning their production with the demands and concerns of the middle class, the commercial media have rendered peasants and workers voiceless and invisible. The social groups that used to form the class basis of the CCP now constitute the most disenfranchised population. While displacing the socialist values of collectivity and equality in favor of a consumerist orientation toward individual choice and autonomy, the commercial media constantly generate discourses that justify capitalism as a form of wealth production and distribution superior to socialism.

In this sense, far from being the kind of post-ideological political scandal that Thompson (2000) focused on in his book, the Bo Xilai case is deeply ideological. Bo’s political agenda

and his leadership style not only brought to the fore the intense ideological struggle between Party factions, but also polarized public opinion, with mediatized manifestations of both these phenomena. In the ideological war of position (Gramsci, 1971/2008: 108-110), media organizations do not just serve as platforms or instruments of certain interest groups, they themselves are important players that actively engage in the ideological struggle. The media coverage of the Bo Xilai case was by no means a concerted effort derived from some kind of consensus indicating a sharing of common goals. Before the official announcement of Bo's expulsion in March 2012, it was the mainstream domestic media that did most reporting on Bo Xilai and his policies in Chongqing. Between early 2012 and the trial of Bo in the summer of 2013, the international news media and the Internet played a more prominent role, as domestic news outlets had little choice but to toe the official line after the case became a major political scandal. In August 2013, the unprecedented "live webcast" of Bo's trial once again turned the Internet into the center of attention and communication. Despite the ostensible differences in reporting style and details, there were surprisingly consistent threads running across different platforms and these warrant further probing.

To untangle the "intriguing and complex communicative politics around the Bo saga" (Zhao, 2012b), I develop my argument on the basis of two interconnecting themes, the mediatized ideological struggle and the politicized media logic. The empirical material for this article came from both primary and secondary sources. I conducted a discourse analysis of policy documents, news articles published by both party-organ and mainstream commercial newspapers, as well as posts on major online forums. I monitored the webcast of Bo Xilai's trial closely, archived and analyzed both the daily release of court transcripts and readers' comments. I also conducted informal interviews with more than a dozen journalists in order to get a sense of how media professionals were navigating the delicate and complex situation. The secondary material garnered from existing research provides important

contextual information that helps to put contemporary media politics in China into a much-needed historical perspective.

The mediatized ideological struggle

Ever since China embarked on economic reform in the late 1970s, the tension between a capitalist economy and a nominally communist ruling party has been a thorny issue for the regime. No other country has had a similar situation in which a state that was forged by a communist revolution and still claims to be building socialism has been pursuing ‘a paradigm of development that was the product of capitalism’ (Dirlik, 2005). The ‘cat theory’ enunciated by Deng Xiaoping, who is credited as the ‘chief designer of China’s reform and opening-up,’ was an ingenious move to circumvent ideological debate by means of the purest pragmatism. As China became further integrated into global capitalism, later generations of the central leadership resorted to different rhetoric to articulate the CCP’s political agenda amidst growing socioeconomic inequalities. From Jiang Zemin’s ‘three represents’ to Hu Jintao’s ‘scientific outlook on development’ and ‘harmonious society’ and Xi Jinping’s ‘Chinese dream,’ it was no coincidence that all these shied away from directly engaging with class-based politics and the socialist ideal of building a ‘people’s democracy’ led by the working class. To be sure the party still derives much of its legitimacy from the legacy of socialist revolution (Shue, 2004), yet it is also true that the socialist ideals of equality, social justice and morality are now frequently invoked in social protest (Lee, 2007; Lin, 2006; O’Brien & Li, 2006). The disenfranchised peasants and workers who have been exploited and repressed in the capitalist transformation are trying to hold the party accountable for its initial promises.

Under such circumstance, it is crucial for the CCP to secure the ‘commanding heights’ of the rapidly expanding media scene (Zhao, 2008), especially when it comes to the reinterpretation of class politics and the appropriation of revolutionary history, both of which are ideological sources that Bo Xilai drew heavily upon in articulating his political agenda. On his appointment as Party Secretary of Chongqing in 2007, Bo implemented a series of initiatives to address both economic and social problems in this large inland city. On the economic front, the local government significantly enlarged the public sector and its role in the economy. As a 2012 *Foreign Policy* article put it, this was ‘a daring experiment in using state policy and state resources to advance the interests of ordinary people’ (Liu, 2012). Bo’s social policies emphasized distributive justice (*minsheng*, which literally translates as livelihood), which included low-income housing projects, a reformed *hukou* registration system that eased the migration of rural residents into the cities, and a land exchange mechanism to maximize the usage of farmland (Cui, 2011)¹.

Not only did Bo emphasize social equality and wealth redistribution, he also tried to revitalize ‘red culture’ by promoting socialist cultural symbols and public service media. He Shizhong, the Chongqing Propaganda Chief under Bo Xilai, explained the four key dimensions of ‘red culture’: *chang* (singing red songs), *du* (reading the classics), *jiang* (telling stories) and *chuan* (spreading slogans) (He, 2010). These four activities were intended not only to mobilize support for Bo’s economic and social policies, but also to formulate counter-hegemonic discourses to combat the corrosive influence of commercialism and consumerism. Strangely enough, for the first time since the CCP embarked on its course of ‘socialist marketization,’ which has been criticized by many on the Left as having a strong neoliberal component (Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006; Wang, 2009), it was the Chongqing Party Secretary rather than the central government who articulated a more coherent political agenda in which policy and rhetoric were better aligned under socialist rubrics.

The news of Bo Xilai's dismissal was released to the public in a peculiar manner. On February 6, 2012, rumors started circulating on Weibo that Chongqing Police Chief Wang Lijun had fled to the U.S. consulate in Chengdu to seek assistance, allegedly after falling out with Bo. Wang was Bo's right-hand man in his famed campaign against organized crime and was even featured in a television drama as a 'gangbuster hero.' The rumor was quickly picked up by Western media (e.g., Branigan, 2012; Hille, 2012; Johnson, 2012b), while the domestic media kept silent. On March 14, at the closing press conference of the National People's Congress (NPC), in answering the final question from a Reuters reporter regarding Wang Lijun, Premier Wen Jiabao accused the Chongqing leadership of reviving the Cultural Revolution. Wen referred to the CCP's 1981 *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party*, which officially declared the Cultural Revolution to have been a 'disaster for the country and the people.' He then warned against repeating that historical tragedy:

What has happened shows that any practice that we adopt must be based on experience and lessons we have learned from history and must serve the people's interests. The actions that we take must be able to stand the test of history and reality. I believe that everyone in China understands this, and I have confidence in our future.

For anyone who understands Chinese history and the Party's verdict on the Cultural Revolution, Wen's seemingly banal statement carries a strong message. It designates what happened in Chongqing as a forbidden subject, just like the Cultural Revolution itself, 'not available for public debate or historical analysis and fit only for political condemnation' (Wang, 2012: 14). Around 9 o'clock on the morning of the 15th, the online *People's Daily* hinted on Weibo that there was about to be 'an important news announcement.' At 10.03 a.m., the Xinhua news agency reported on Weibo that Bo Xilai had been removed as Chongqing Party Secretary.

In the ensuing 18 months leading up to the trial, the official news on Bo was kept to a

minimum, with only a few terse reports from Xinhua. Mainstream commercial newspapers were largely silent on the topic, while party-organ newspapers such as the *People's Daily* and *Guangming Daily* called with a concerted editorial voice for unity and support for the party's decision (Wong & Ansfield, 2012). In the meantime, leftist websites supportive of Bo, such as Utopia (*wuyou zhixiang*), were shut down. On the other hand, overseas websites such as Boxun and the *Falun Gong* site Epoch Times, which had long been deemed 'hostile' by the party-state, suddenly became accessible in China (Zhao, 2012a: 10). Discussions on the former tended to view Bo as the victim of the 'line struggle' (*luxian douzheng*) between the neo-liberal approach and the more egalitarian developmental path that the Chongqing Model represents. The latter group, however, accused Bo of wanting to return China to the dark age of the Cultural Revolution. From the perspective of the CCP's top leaders, the last thing they were willing to acknowledge was how the Bo Xilai incident had brought to the center of the global stage the long-existing fight between different party factions. That is to say, Bo and his Chongqing Model invoked a series of significant questions about the legacy and the future of Chinese socialism that the CCP central leadership found too difficult to confront. In order to minimize the disruption to the current market-oriented, developmentalist approach, the top leaders opted for a non-ideological frame that defined the confrontation as a disciplinary action by the Party against a corrupt official.

The central leadership's strategy for coping with the unprecedented visibility of political in-fighting was to structure the terms of the mediatization to its own advantage. On the surface, the decision to have a 'live webcast' of the trial on Sina Weibo was a surprising act of transparency. This was an example of political actors adapting their behavior to the media's 'attention rules, production routines, selection criteria and molding mechanism.' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 251) Posting court transcripts with a slight delay was an ingenious move to harness the power of digital networks—it greatly enhanced the perceived

legitimacy of the handling of the case, while retaining control. The unexpected drama in the courtroom, such as Bo's wife and his former closest ally testifying against him, his firm denial of every single charge by the prosecutor, his reluctant disclosure of the affair between Gu Kailai and Wang Lijun, were all riveting and captured the attention of the whole nation. More importantly, the surprising details revealed through the Weibo account of what was taking place in the Jinan Intermediate Court seemed to reinforce the notion that the trial was fair, rather than one of those highly scripted shows intended simply to close the chapter on a disgraced official.

Paradoxically, as Sina Weibo became the central node not only connecting other networks but also feeding information between different channels, the high level of interconnection enabled even more control of information. Compared with the traditional media, the interactivity of digital networks has made it easier to monitor them and to respond to dissenting voices and counter-hegemonic discourses in real time. According to Chen Tong, Chief Editor of sina.com, the company tripled the number of their breaking-news staff to work on the reporting of the trial (Xu, 2013). The extra personnel worked mainly on two tasks, one proactive and one reactive. To supplement the text-only court transcripts, sina.com provided extensive multi-media background information on the witnesses in the case and the major events mentioned in the trial. The fact that the 'live webcast' was on Sina's microblogging platform gave it an unbeatable advantage over its competitors, such as Sohu and Tencent. Sina knew all too well that the advantage was contingent upon toeing the Party line, hence the information-filtering mechanism they put in place was equally extensive. For example, according to my observation, within half an hour of the release of the first court transcript, the number of comments on the Court's official Weibo account grew to more than 1,200, then quickly dropped to less than 600. The comments deleted were those praising Bo Xilai and questioning the fairness of the trial, such as 'Bo is a good person and people in

Dalian miss him,’ ‘Bo Xilai turned Chongqing into a much better place, we are grateful to him,’ ‘the winners crowned and the loser vilified (*chengwang baikou*).’ Further, comments applauding the transparency of the trial and how the case represented the progress of the Chinese legal system were pushed to the top. Many of these were left by newly registered “zombie” accounts, leading to wide speculation that these were the ‘Internet water army’ (*wangluo shuijun*) hired by Sina to manipulate online public opinion. The top comments were likely to be picked up by mainstream newspapers as evidence of the ‘people’s voice.’ Sina would subsequently borrow these comments from the mainstream media to frame the next day’s trial reportage.

Online opinion leaders were closely monitored, but this time it was the leftists (such as @张宏良, @司马平邦, and @孔庆东), rather than the liberals, who were censored or subject to temporary suspension of their accounts. Offline, Bo’s grassroots supporters congregated outside the Intermediate Court of Jinan and their activities during the five-day trial were filmed for a documentary called *Spectators (Weiguan zhe)* made by journalist Liu Xiangnan using a hand-held camera. But within China the documentary could only be circulated under the radar, and outside China very few people even knew about it. This segment of the ‘people’s voice,’ dissenting from the official narrative, was never heard by a wider audience.

In the age of global networks, with observers ranging from global media to Chinese netizens all watching intensively the unfolding of the event, it was simply impossible to exert total control. Indeed, what the party aimed for was no longer full control of every single information channel, but rather a dominant frame that would assimilate fragments of ‘leaks’ and ‘rumors’ into a largely coherent narrative. As Zhao (2008: 33) points out, ‘the party’s answer to the poststructuralist question of ‘how control exists after decentralization’ is the decentralization of control.’

Politicized media logic

The mainstream commercial media started playing a significant role in defining Bo Xilai and his Chongqing Model well before the scandal erupted. To a large extent, the different accounts of what the Chongqing Model was and the varied assessments of its success (or failure) are themselves closely linked to commentators' ideological viewpoints. Leftist intellectuals discussed whether the economic and social policies being carried out in Chongqing were attempts to revitalize socialism in China (e.g. Cui, 2012; Wang, 2012; Zhao, 2012b), while mainstream news media predominately paid attention to the crackdown on organized crime, commonly dubbed 'striking down black' (*dahei*), and the 'singing red' (*changhong*) campaign, which promoted revolutionary and nationalist culture. These colorful catchphrases were utilized frequently by both the party organs and the commercial media to characterize the political agenda in Chongqing. First of all, by always singling out the 'singing red' initiative from other policy initiatives in Chongqing, the mainstream media hollowed out its political significance. For example in the two articles about 'singing red' published in the May 12th, 2011, issue of *Southern Weekend*, China's flagship liberal newspaper, the reporters focused on how best to organize an American-Idol-style talent show featuring revolutionary songs (*hongge hui*), including the difficulty of securing commercial sponsorship. One of the articles, very tellingly, was titled 'Singing red is just another form of cultural consumption.' (Su & Nie, 2011). A campaign that aimed to achieve 'not only a new subjectivity and cultural self-confidence, but also a sense that a better future is possible' (Zhao, 2012b: 6) was thus neutralized and depicted as 'just another show.' Second, when the

media coverage did make political references, these were not to the development model that Chongqing had been experimenting with, but to the Cultural Revolution. Rather than linking the ‘singing red’ campaign with the current agenda of reclaiming the revolutionary legacy through prioritizing livelihood (*minsheng*) and common prosperity (*gongfu*), headline photos of big groups waving red flags depicted an image of ‘red terror.’ Interestingly, both the *People’s Daily*, the central party-organ newspaper, and *Cai Jing*, a liberal news magazine acclaimed by many in the West, published comments that connected the ‘red culture’ in Chongqing with the Cultural Revolution.

The tactical framing turned into explicit criticism when it came to the radical reform of Chongqing Satellite TV (CTV), which, along with mass mobilization, was the other major component of the ‘red culture’ campaign. In January 2011, CTV announced that it would replace prime-time television drama with ‘red culture programming.’ In March of that year, CTV stopped broadcasting commercials and converted to a public service model. The huge revenue loss of 300 million RMB per year as a result of dropping advertising was partly compensated for by government subsidy. The Propaganda Minister, He Shizhong, defined the new nature of CTV as the government providing cultural products to the people as a public service, and emphasized that ‘people should not only be the audience of CTV, but also the active participants. The quality of the CTV programming relies on the judgment and participation of the people.’ (He, quoted by Zhao, 2011) The critical voices centered around two main points. First, there was a unanimous verdict that the ‘law of the market’ (*shichang guilv*) should be the gold standard observed by all media organizations, regardless of what type of service they were providing. Some proclaimed that getting rid of commercials would lead to a ‘winter of CTV,’ as those responsible had ‘made a U-turn by contravening the law of media development. If all the television stations go back to ground zero as CTV is doing, our nation might as well not reform and open up’ (Wang, & Hu, quoted by Zhao, 2011) Yu

Guoming, a journalism professor at Renmin University, was quoted as saying that ‘the reason why people can now watch television for free was because advertisers paid for the programming. If television stations stop broadcasting commercials, they have to rely on either government subsidy or a license fee, both of which are eventually taxpayers’ money. Isn’t it funny that you would rather pay the bill yourself even if somebody offered to pay it for you?’ (Yu, quoted by Lv, 2011) What goes hand-in-hand with the blind faith in the market is the denial of the publicness of CTV’s new model. One columnist writing for the business section of Netease, one of the major portal sites in China, pointed out that ‘public service broadcasters such as BBC and NHK are funded by license fees rather than government subsidy. CTV has to use 150 million RMB in taxpayer’s money annually since the elimination of commercials. This is not only returning to the age of the command economy, but will also undermine the autonomy of news production.’²

Through a series of discursive positionings, the commercial media first severed the linkage between the campaign and China’s socialist legacy, then recontextualized it in relation to the neoliberal hegemony. By separating cultural policies from the social agenda being implemented in Chongqing, the mainstream media bracketed out any components of the ‘red culture’ campaign that resonated with ordinary people, especially with socially marginalized groups that did not benefit as much as others from the market economy. To deny such resonance is to turn a blind eye both to the historical trajectory and to any future possibility of Chinese socialism—which had been a conscious effort to resist global capitalism, and still could be if resurrected (Lin, 2006). It is, then, only a logical follow-up, rather than a coincidence, that the two themes emerging from the commentaries on CTV reform represent the ‘core values’ of neoliberalism—that marketization is synonymous with progress and that state intervention restricts freedom and obstructs development. The mainstream commercial media, far from being passive recipients of the combined force of the state and the market,

are actively configuring the political matrix they operate from by taking up a strategic position on the ideological spectrum.

With Bo Xilai's sudden fall from strong contender for a central leadership position to dismissed official awaiting trial, online forums and international media took the place of the mainstream domestic media as the key information source—for obvious reasons. As a result, a Chinese political scandal became a global media spectacle configured by the power structure of the information networks. The level of connectivity of different social actors, which includes not only access to networks per se, but also the ability to influence others, is highly stratified. As Curran (2012: 9) reminds us, the impact of the Internet is not dictated by its technology, rather it is 'filtered through the structures and processes of society.' Inequalities within and across countries can distort online dialogue in many different ways. For instance, as the world marvels at the number of Chinese Internet users, which reached 618 million by December 2013, what is often neglected is the fact that this is only 45.8% of the population. It is worth noting that, although the international media tend to refer to Bo's leadership style as 'populist,' the disenfranchised groups that benefited most from his social policies rarely had a voice in either mainstream or digital media. Rather, it was political and media elites, both within and outside China, that had the strongest presence in global networks. In the mediatized spectacle of Bo Xilai's downfall, no single actor was able to exert full control over the networks, but a dominant narrative concerning the nature of this political struggle was established when the positions of different actors converged.

The apparent political significance of the case, the state censorship that led to the scarcity of official reports, the media's urge to maintain their status as the privileged point of access to reality (Couldry, 2003), and Chinese netizens' insatiable appetite for more information—the mixture of all these factors is a perfect recipe for rumors and sensational stories. Rumors were indeed plentiful, one outstripping the next in its sensationalism, and these largely

pointed to three crimes that were perceived to have led to Bo's ouster. First and foremost, there are various accounts of his corruption, ranging from taking bribes and embezzlement to graft and selling state assets for personal gain. In one of the more extreme versions, the amount of wealth Bo and his family accumulated was said to be more than \$1.2 billion (Osnos, 2012). The second explanation was that he spied on other Politburo members including the President and Party Secretary Hu Jintao (Johnson, 2012a). Citing 'a dozen people with party ties' who had requested anonymity, the *New York Times* believed that the hidden wiretapping 'provided another compelling reason for party leaders to turn on Bo.' Then there were racy stories of Bo's sexual relationships with many women, the most famous of whom was the actress Zhang Ziyi. Zhang subsequently filed a libel suit against two Hong Kong newspapers and the U.S.-based Boxun website, and won the case in December 2013 (BBC, 2013). On top of all these accusations, Wang Lijun's attempted defection to the U.S. and the alleged murder of British businessman Neil Heywood by Bo's wife, Gu Kailai, turned the scandal into even more of a global media spectacle.

It appears that all the rumors and leaks from anonymous sources were undermining the party's effort to contain the most serious political infighting since 1989. The colorful details released via various non-state sources were in sharp contrast to the brevity of Xinhua reports. For the first time, the secretive world of CCP elite politics was exposed in a highly mediatized manner, thanks to the combined influence of Chinese social media and international news outlets. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the media logic behind the political spectacle, expressed through sensational stories, converged with the intention of the CCP elite to depoliticize the events.

The international media are eager for a scoop on the political drama. For one thing, nuanced discussion of the historical context of Chinese politics does not make good headlines and could very well confuse non-Chinese readers. Scandalous details of corruption, betrayal,

murder and spying sell much better and are easily digestible. More importantly, given Western liberal media's entrenched attitude toward Chinese socialism, the egalitarian policies and socialist discourse that Bo had been promoting in Chongqing were not something they shared ideological affinity with. As a result, mainstream English-language news media that had never been famous for agreeing with the Chinese government endorsed Wen Jiabao's warning against repeating the Cultural Revolution. The day after Wen made this comment at an NPCC press conference, the *Financial Times* commented that 'Mr. Wen is correct to warn that a move toward Bo Xilai's style of politics would take China in precisely the wrong direction—away from a more open and law-governed society and back towards a more capricious and dangerous style of populist politics' (*Financial Times*, 2012). The *New York Times* sketch of Bo is telling: 'Tall, charismatic and unusually loquacious for a Chinese official, Mr. Bo, 63, had led a 'red' campaign in the teeming mountain city that called on its citizens to sing Mao-era songs. While popular among the city's 32 million residents, Mr. Bo's style unnerved many who said his tactics threatened to revive the destructive leftist ways of the past.' (Jacobs, 2012)

Much as the top CCP leaders, the international media and Chinese Internet companies each have their own agenda to pursue, they ended up sustaining a highly sensational, yet politically neutralized, media spectacle of the Bo Xilai trial. Lin Chun observes:

The current crisis may be the last milestone in the Chinese path of negating socialism. What is extraordinary about it is the alliance of a Communist leadership, rightwing anti-Communist factions inside and outside China (including *Falun Gong*), and western governments and press – a phenomenal example of 21st-century postmodern politics. (Lin, 2012)

Maybe all this is not so post-modern after all, if viewed with an understanding of the mutual constitution of political logic and media logic.

Conclusion

It is a well-known fact that struggles between factions at the highest level of the CCP have often been played out in the guise of anti-corruption investigations, especially during leadership transitions (McGergor, 2010). Bo Xilai is not the first to have experienced a sudden fall from political superstar to convicted criminal, although his privileged background as a ‘princeling’ made the downfall seem particularly dramatic. Nonetheless, two things set the story of Bo apart from previous cases such as those of Chen Xitong and Chen Liangyu.

First, the conflict between Bo and the central leadership is not only a political struggle over which faction gets a larger share of power. It is also an ideological struggle that laid bare the contradictions between the Party’s socialist promise and capitalist policies. By invoking China’s socialist legacy in order to articulate a political agenda prioritizing redistribution and shared prosperity, Bo Xilai trespassed on two forbidden zones. One was the central leadership’s monopoly over the appropriation and reinterpretation of revolutionary history. The other was the Party’s ongoing effort to push aside socialist discourse with non-ideological promises of things like a ‘harmonious society’ and a ‘Chinese dream.’ If what we usually see in China is mediatization without politics, or mediatization in lieu of politics, the Bo Xilai scandal was an exception to this. Sun observes that the Chinese state media has mostly pursued mediatization *by* the government rather than mediatization *of* the government, as one does not see the debates between different factions within the party; instead, one only sees consensus when policies are announced. Such a strategy has been largely successful ‘in maintaining stability and promoting national unity’ (p.103), and this was an important reason why Bo Xilai and his Chongqing Model were perceived by some top leaders as a threat.

Second, Bo's ouster and subsequent conviction was a highly mediatized event that unfolded on global information networks. In this process, the role of media institutions went far beyond providing a communication platform. The media performed an important political function in configuring the dominant narrative reinforcing neoliberal hegemony. Some scholars have been critical of media marketization in China, which is widely regarded as a state-initiated and closely monitored project intended to serve two purposes—achieving economic profitability and sustaining political legitimacy (Jiang, 2014; Lee, He, & Huang, 2006; Lee, He, & Huang, 2007; Qiu, 2007; Sparks, 2010; Zhao, 1998). This line of argument tends to place the media on the receiving end of state power, by focusing on the evolution of the state-control mechanism and how the party-state is constantly co-opting the commercial media into the authoritarian propaganda machine (e.g., Brady, 2008; Lee, et al., 2006). The mediatization perspective helps to highlight the power of the media themselves at both institutional and discursive levels. As much as both the structure and the content of Chinese media are products of the authoritarian state, their own need to survive and to be sustainable propels media institutions into taking strong initiatives to shape their environment. Since merely claiming loyalty to the regime is no longer sufficient for their survival in a competitive market, media organizations now make calculated moves to strengthen their position as the only access to truth.

In the light of the mediatized politics of the Bo Xilai case, the quote at the beginning of this article is a pertinent reminder of the dialectics between mediatized ideological struggle and the ideology of media logic. As the power of the media permeates modern life, political actors are developing new strategies for exploiting mediatized visibility, especially at a time of conflict and struggle. This can be achieved either by discursive means such as constructing certain narratives or by institutional means such as censorship, building communication capacity or the reconfiguration of communication networks. On the other hand, media logic

itself is highly ideological given its affinity with market capitalism and middle-class orientation. Whenever we try to read politics in a mediatized manner, we need to be wary of the tensions between visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion in global communication networks.

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¹ It is worth pointing out that Cui Zhiyuan, a leading leftist intellectual who has been critical of neoliberal economic policies, served as the Deputy Director of municipal government Commission for State-owned Assets during Bo's tenure in Chongqing.

² <http://money.163.com/keywords/9/c/91cd5e86536b89c6/1.html>