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## **Power, ambition, and arrogance: Lessons of Bo Xilai's 'Singing Red Song' campaign as a political communication project**

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### **Abstract <sup>1</sup>**

For nearly four years from mid 2008 to early 2012, a high profile and highly controversial mass red song campaign was powerfully mobilised in Chongqing by then Party chief of Chongqing Bo Xilai. In spite of its significance as a complex political-cultural discourse and immense media and public interest in it, there has been little critical academic research into case from a political communication perspective. The purpose of this study is to attempt to bridge this research gap.

### **Introduction**

Chongqing, a mountain port city along the upper Yangtze River in central China, enjoyed high profile publicity in recent years for a series of highly controversial neo-Maoist political-ideological and socio-economic policies advocated by the metropolitan's Party chief Bo Xilai. Dubbed by the media as the so-called 'Chongqing model', those policies included: the 'singing red songs' campaign, the 'cracking down on crimes' campaign, increased government political-economic power against private economy and civil rights, tightened security controls against the rule of law, massive public infrastructure projects, government subsidized housing for the poor, and certain pro-peasant initiatives (Johnson, 2012; Liu, 2011; Wang, 2012). The current study focuses its investigation on the 'Singing Red Songs' campaign (SRS campaign hereafter) for two major reasons. One is this author's strong research interest in the campaign from a political communication perspective. Another reason, as will be further discussed below, is the high importance of the campaign for one's understanding of the 'Chongqing model' in general.

The term 'red songs' refers collectively to songs that have been composed in recognition and praise of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leadership and achievements as well as the revolutionary idealism and ethics associated to the Chinese communist movement. For nearly four years, from mid 2008 to early 2012, the SRS campaign, orchestrated by now disgraced CCP Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai mobilised thousands of local officials and ordinary Chongqing folks to participate in numerous red song events in order to lift their spirits. In any sense, it was phenomenal to watch hundreds of thousands of singers chanted red songs with lyrics like "Oh, Party, my dear mom" or praising the CCP as 'You are the lighthouse/Shining on the ocean before dawn/You are the helmsman' (China.org.cn, 2011; Demick, 2011). Over the years, the campaign received massive media coverage locally and to various degrees nationally and internationally too. The campaign divided public opinion in China to such an extent that for some it was no more than a ridiculous mini Mao-style mass political campaign, and for others it was an exciting and positive response to the country's ideological and moral bankruptcy under post-communist market-authoritarianism. With Bo's dramatic sacking in March 2012, the

campaign suddenly came to an end. More recently, on 22 September 2013, he was sentenced to life in prison for bribery, abuse of power, and embezzlement. It is the opportune time to have an academic investigation of the campaign as only now are some inside stories from behind the scenes being revealed for the first time by both Chinese and Western media.

The SRS campaign arguably served as the most symbolically significant part of the 'Chongqing model', not only for its 'red' nature as the ideological-moral fabric of the model, but also for its constant and visually eye-catching presence in the public arena. For these reasons though, the campaign was later expanded to a larger mass political movement called 'Singing (red songs), Studying (decent classics), Telling (good stories), and Spreading (upbeat mottos)' (*chang du jiang chuan*) (CQNEWS.NET, 2010), and the original 'singing' part far outperformed the three parts that followed. These later additions were largely abandoned not long after they were launched. According to official statistics provided by the Chongqing authorities, as of the end of January 2012 (about two months before Bo's fall), the metropolis had held 251,600 red song events with 182 million person-time participants ([www.cq.gov.cn](http://www.cq.gov.cn), 2012). Red song choir groups from Chongqing were also invited to perform in some other Chinese cities including Beijing (Nanfang Net, 2011) and even Hong Kong (Zheng, 2012). In the words of He Shizhong, propaganda chief of CCP Chongqing Committee, the SRS campaign had become the city's 'signature brand' (Chongqing Daily, 2012).

In spite of the significance of the SRS campaign as a complex political-cultural discourse, and the immense media and public interest in it, an extensive review of English-language research literature has found no specific and systematic academic study of the campaign. Even in Steen's (2013) recently published insightful book chapter on the red song phenomenon in China from a historical perspective, the SRS campaign in Chongqing was barely discussed in a detailed and systematic manner. While within China one may find numerous publications about the campaign through relevant Chinese academic databases, there is a profound lack of critical analysis and contextualization. In particular, while the campaign – as will be discussed further later – is obviously mobilised and controlled by Bo for his political ambition, there has been little, if any, research on the campaign from a political communication perspective. The purpose of this study is to attempt to bridge this research gap. To make sense of the campaign as a political communication project, this study conceptually benefits from Pippa Norris's (2004) three-tier framework of political communication as quoted below. According to Norris:

“ Political communications is an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media and the public. The process operates down-wards from governing institutions towards citizens, horizontally in linkages among political actors, and also upwards from public opinion towards authorities. (Norris, 2004: 1) ”

While Norris seems to have advanced this framework mainly for the purpose of conceptualising political communication in a Western-style liberal democratic society, it remains a very useful basic analytical framework for the understanding of political communication in a general sense. As further discussion will reveal later, even in the case of China as a one-party state, successful political communication still depends heavily on effective interaction among politicians, the media, and the general public.

## The campaign as a political communication project

The SRS campaign started officially on 25 July 2008 when the Chongqing authorities' decision to launch the campaign was made available to the Chongqing public in an article published in the *Chongqing Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CCP Chongqing Committee (Guan, 2008). Calling for 'a widespread campaign for singing classical red songs', the decision required every local council to form its own red song choir team with government cadres as key members. All educational departments and schools must also integrate the SRS campaign into their existing patriotic educational program and music curriculum. In the meantime, artists and music educators were urged to play an active role in helping improve the mass participants' singing skills. The decision emphasized that the campaign was by no means a once-only event but would from now on serve as an integral part of Chongqing people's everyday political-cultural life through mass red song concerts, red song karaoke competitions, and red song festivals.

While the Chongqing authorities gave no reason for their dramatic decision to launch the campaign, it is widely believed that it was triggered directly by an incident which occurred in late May when Bo was visiting a local preschool. On one occasion during that visit, Bo invited some school kids to sing a few popular patriotic songs together, with which the kids performed well. But when Bo suggested for them to have another go by mentioning an extremely popular piece titled *Ode to the Motherland*, he was surprised to find the poor children were clueless. Upon leaving the school, a disappointed Bo instructed his attendants that moral and patriotic education of adolescents and youth was extremely important for the rise of the nation and must be strengthened (Chen, 2009).

But the incident mentioned above alone can hardly explain the whole or real motivation behind the campaign. It

should be noted that singing red songs was in itself nothing new to reform era China. By the late 2000s, local and foreign pop songs on love and romance had long become mainstream, particularly among youth, after decades of market-oriented socio-economic reforms, but people still often sang red songs for various reasons (e.g., see Steen, 2013). Red songs would be sung during major officially organised political or cultural celebration events to glorify the CCP in leading the nation from one victory after another. Red songs remained popular among many ordinary Chinese too. While for many of older generations singing red songs brought back memories and nostalgia of their youth in the more humble and idealistic early years of the People's Republic, youngsters were simply attracted to the melodies or as part of their exploration and re-imagination of revolutionary fantasies. For similar reasons, many people often choose popular red songs when displaying vocal prowess in karaoke clubs.

Red song/culture programs also helped lift the ratings of some radio or television stations. For example, Jiangxi Satellite TV started a popular red song reality show "China Red Song Concerts" (*zhongguo hong ge hui*) in 2006 and this became an instant success (and has been held annually since). The TV station later even accused Chongqing of *copyright* infringement when the latter launched its own 'China Red Song Concert' in 2011 (Qiu, 2011).

Compared with these individual, symbolic, or commercialised red song activities, the SRS campaign in Chongqing stood out with two unique characteristics. Firstly, it was the first powerfully and systematically organised official mass red song campaign in post-Mao China. Secondly, it was the first high profile moral-ideological education movement initiated and promoted by a local government. These factors made the campaign both extraordinary and controversial. It was extraordinary because – as will be elaborated on later – it was in contradiction to the CCP's tradition that the Party's policy decision making on major ideological-moral issues must be always made at the central level. It was controversial because Bo-led Chongqing authorities pretended that they could effectively respond to the moral-ideological crisis facing the Party and nation by reviving the CCP's conservative red culture as reflected in red songs (revolutionary sagas, cults, heroism, collectivism, and patriotism, as well as upbeat and austere life style, 'healthy' love stories, and hardworking and loyalty).

Then why were Bo-led Chongqing authorities determined to take a risk in launching the campaign? To answer this question, we need to have a close look at Bo as a unique Chinese politician because the SRS campaign was essentially his individual political communication project rather than one belonging to the Chongqing authorities as a collective.

Under China's one party political system, any local Party chief, let alone a provincial Party leader like Bo who was also a member of the powerful Politburo of the CCP, could more or less behave like a 'little emperor' in his or her own territory of power. Bo had been well known for his political ambition and arrogant personality long before he became Party chief of Chongqing (Li, 2012; Miller, 2012; Wines, 2012; Xu, 2013). In particular, he made no secret of his desire to claim a seat in China's most powerful political body the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) of the CCP. He attempted to gain membership in a 2007 PSC reshuffle when he was serving as Minister of Commerce, but failed. Refusing to give up, he was determined to seize a seat in the next National Congress of the CCP scheduled in Autumn 2012. Unlike his peers, such as Party chief of Guangdong Wang Yang who were equally as ambitious as Bo but who remained reasonably low-key and cautious, Bo had no intention to hide his political ambition. As noted by many observers (e.g., see Li, 2012; Miller, 2012; Wines, 2012), Bo was openly chasing and competing for a PSC seat by determinedly doing something big and exceptional to ensure that he would stand out from the crowd. Only when we place the SRS campaign into this context, does it become possible to fully understand the real or main motivation behind the campaign. Putting it simply, it was a political communication project designed and mobilised by Bo as a powerful, ambitious, and arrogant politician who was hungry for greater power.

In regards to Bo's arrogant personality, there were four major attributes. One was his privileged social status as a somewhat spoiled red princeling (as the son of one of the CCP's revolutionary legends Bo Yibo). Another factor was his prominent political status as member of the powerful Politburo of the CCP and Party secretary of Chongqing (the largest metropolis of China). He was seen by many as a tall, handsome and charismatic man. Last, he was also widely perceived by many as a very talented Chinese politician with a very different leadership style (though not without controversy): he was fresh, energetic, confident, eloquent, media-savvy, hardworking, and performance-oriented.

On his post as Party chief of Chongqing, Bo won the title of 'Man of the Year' in a 2009 online poll conducted by the *People's Daily*, mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee (Li, 2012: 141). He was also named as one of the 'World's 100 Most Influential People in 2010' by the *Time* magazine (Ramzy, 2010). Such high profile publicity might have given him extra confidence to take a political gamble to push forward many of his controversial policies, including the SRS campaign, without caring too much about how they might be viewed by the CCP's top leadership and the general public. As an insider of Chinese politics who knew Bo well told the *New York Times*, "[f]rom the county up to the Politburo, he's a person who has to have it his way' and '[t]hat's just his character" (Wines, 2012).

In the case of the SRS campaign, Bo made it crystal clear that it was his campaign, and he was in charge of everything. As the officially run Chongqing News Net (CQNEWS.NET, 2010) stated, the SRS campaign was supervised directly by the Bo-led CCP Chongqing Committee and personally guided by Bo himself. Further evidence can be found in a recently published blog by a leading Chinese journalist that revealed many details on Bo's role as both commander and operator in promoting the campaign (Xu, 2013). While it is true that by and large nearly all red song activities in post-Mao China were instrumentally used by the Party state (Steen, 2003), no individual (let alone individual local) politician had ever politically exploited such activities as directly and aggressively as Bo did. If there was any connection between the campaign and the incident that occurred during Bo's visit to the preschool as mentioned earlier, it was more likely to be the case that the incident triggered or catalysed his idea to launch a potentially politically lucrative conservative mass cultural movement and that this might have been more or less in his mind for some time.

By using Norris's framework, the target audience of the SRS campaign as a political communication project launched by Bo to serve his political ambition can be identified as three-fold: the local Chongqing and national press community, Chongqing people and the wider Chinese public, and the CCP's top leadership in Beijing. While for the convenience of analysis, I shall discuss how the campaign was communicated to each of these three audience groups separately below, it is important to note that in practice they were actually correlated, and to a certain extent, partly overlapping.

## Mediating the campaign

Aiming at attracting media attention to his SRS campaign nationally, Bo adopted a 'think national act local' strategy. As he had little power to influence media beyond Chongqing, Bo seemed to hope that a powerful local 'success' orchestrated by local Chongqing media under his absolute control would quickly spill over to media nationally.

In a single-party state like China, power means nearly everything. This is particularly so at the local level where the Party secretary absolutely controls all aspects of local politics (in comparison, some sort of collective leadership by PSC members led by the General Secretary at the central level has gradually brought into practice in the post-Deng era, e.g., see Li, 2012). For this reason, in the case of the SRS campaign, Bo was able to not only mobilise enormous administrative and financial resources to support his marathon campaigning, but also ensure local media's full cooperation in promoting the campaign as a creative Chongqing-brand mass moral-ideological education movement. In other words, Bo had no need to negotiate with local media and journalists; he simply ordered them to do whatever they were asked to do, otherwise, they would be heavily punished and could even be sent to jail (e.g., see He, 2012; Xu, 2013). As a result of this, nearly all Chongqing media outlets including market-oriented tabloid titles such as the *Chongqing Morning News* and the *Chongqing Evening News*, were forced to give regular extensive coverage of relevant SRS activities in their major news section or prime-time news bulletin and in a highly unified official tone.

One can hardly find a single critical piece against the campaign from any local media outlet during the entire trajectory of the campaign. Bo was a true advocate of traditional communist press theory that sees 'successful' communication little more than a bombardment of the audience with top-down mass propaganda (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). In particular, major official media outlets in Chongqing were highly instrumentally used to increase the campaign's public awareness. They included: the *Chongqing Daily* (mouthpiece of the CCP Chongqing Committee as referred to earlier); Chongqing People's Broadcasting Station; Chongqing Television; Chongqing Satellite Television (these three electronic media outlets are all owned and run by the government-controlled Chongqing Radio and Television Group); the online CQ News (<http://www.cqnews.net>, the largest officially controlled local online news portal); the CCP Chongqing Committee's official website (<http://www.cqjgdj.gov.cn>); and the Chongqing government's official website (<http://www.cq.gov.cn>).

In particular, in early 2011, Chongqing Satellite Television (CST) completed a radical overhaul of its programming imposed by Bo directly (Xu, 2013). In a bid to build 'China's first red TV channel', the CST announced that it would cut all commercial advertisements and substantially reduce entertainment programs while increasing locally produced news and red cultural programs including broadcasting of red songs and films on a daily basis. As a result of this dramatic change, as of early 2012, the CST had suffered about 300 million RMB or US\$47.55 million loss in revenues and left a quarter of its workforce unemployed. Meanwhile, nationally, the station's audience rating plunged from fourth to thirty-fourth (Wen, 2012). Li Xiaofeng, CEO of Chongqing Radio and Television Group was reluctant to take Bo's 'red channel' idea and accept his constant interference in the CST's editorial policy and specific business matters. He was harshly criticized and humiliated by Bo. Li was later given a suspended death sentence by the Chongqing Intermediate People's Court for corruption in November 2011, a case seen by some observers as having been suspiciously politicized (He, 2011; Xu, 2013). The red channel saga was a powerful example that illustrated how the SRS campaign was mediated via a mass communication system in Chongqing, controlled tightly and directly by Bo. Indeed, a red channel with neither editorial independence nor freedom of choosing a business model was perhaps the worst nightmare a Chinese television station could have in the reform era. It was simply a joke when CCP Chongqing Committee propaganda chief He Shizhong described the channel as Chongqing's BBC (Lianhe Zaobao, 2011).

In comparison with Chongqing media's extensive and enthusiastic coverage of the SRS campaign, non-Chongqing media as a whole took a more cautious approach. In China's current socio-political context, the campaign faced an ironic ideological dilemma: it was simultaneously right and wrong. On the surface, it fitted perfectly into the Party's glorious orthodox 'red' cultural tradition. But essentially, its conservative nature and hidden political motivation made it backward and politically suspicious. For China's state-owned media outlets, the campaign thus became a journalistic hot potato: they had to report it for its ideological 'correctness' and considerable newsworthiness. But in the meantime, they were not allowed openly question or challenge it no matter how conservative and controversial it might be.

This problem reflected largely the dilemma the CCP faced in its handling of the issue. On the one hand, the Party's dominant reformist faction led by Party chief Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, was obviously unhappy with Bo's flamboyant personality and the high profile promotion of his conservative 'Chongqing model' (Wines, 2012). On the other hand, they too had to be careful when dealing with the issue: after all, Bo was member of the powerful Politburo and Party secretary of Chongqing and his SRS campaign was promoting a 'correct' red culture that was still officially though half-heartedly upheld by the CCP and shared by conservative forces within and outside the Party (for example and notably, those who gathered around the now banned leftist political-commentary website *Wu You Zhi Xiang* or *Utopia*: <http://www.wyzxsx.com>). Aligning to this subtle official attitude from the CCP's top leadership towards the campaign, propaganda-oriented Party organs like the *People's Daily* intended to treat the SRS campaign both actively and cautiously by framing it as an interesting and useful but also normal patriotic education program, rather than something invented by Bo with magical powers as Chongqing media painted. In the meantime, the commercialised tabloid sector consisting of metro papers (*dushi bao*) and evening papers (*wan bao*), showed much less interest in the campaign and only published short factual stories on major red song events in Chongqing. Having said this, it is also very important to know that not all non-Chongqing media outlets gave Bo that much face by taking a similar non-commenting approach when covering the campaign (more discussion about this later). Because of all this, we see a clear contrast between extremely heated and flattering media coverage locally in Chongqing and comparatively much more limited, cautious, and even critical media coverage of the campaign nationally.

## Communicating the campaign to the general public

In late 2011 or a little more than three months before he was sacked, Bo reaffirmed the SRS campaign's great success by declaring that the campaign "has been widely accepted by Chongqing people as the participation rate has reached 97.3% and the satisfactory rate 96.5%" (Xiao & Shang, 2011). Other hard 'evidence' that was often used by Bo and the Chongqing authorities to demonstrate the campaign's success were four major events in relation to the campaign: the first national red song concert held in Chongqing in October 2010 with more than 3,000 participants and 150,000 person-times audience; the second national red song concert hosted by Chongqing again in late June 2011 with more than 8,000 participants and nearly 100,000 person-times audience, more than 1,000 Chongqing red song singers' participation in the celebration of the CCP's 90th birthday in Beijing in mid-June 2011; and a 400-member Chongqing red song choir group's visit to Hong Kong in February 2012 (Nanfang Net, 2011; Xinhua.net.com, 2011; Zheng, 2012).

But these 'achievements' were actually highly problematic when placed in context. While it is difficult to accurately assess the actual effect of the SRS campaign among the general public without a systematic audience survey, anecdotal evidence from independent journalistic reports and relevant online comments as well as sensible contextual reasoning clearly point to genuine public concerns about the campaign. Even locally in Chongqing, the officially engineered wide media publicity of, and high level of public participation in, the campaign might not have had much influence on or be a true reflection of the actual effects of the campaign among the masses (let alone the doubtful credibility of those official statistics). As discussed earlier, the Chongqing authorities' decision to launch the SRS campaign was clearly stated as an officially mobilised top-down political movement. But later on when facing growing pressure of public questioning and criticism, they changed their position by claiming that their decision to launch the campaign was merely to echo Chongqing people's aspiration to sing red songs (Chongqing Daily, 2011; Xiao & Shang, 2011). Certainly, there were always some people in and beyond Chongqing who sang red songs for various reasons as discussed earlier. But it is difficult to believe why 'Chongqing people' were collectively passionate about singing red songs while people in the rest of the country showed little interest in doing so. Furthermore, even if many Chongqing people did have a hobby of singing red songs, why did the Chongqing authorities rush to intervene? As a *Los Angeles Times* story (Demick, 2011) revealed, in contradiction to the official statement, many participants saw the SRS campaign as a funny political farce and complained about the political pressure they faced when invited. "You have to accept when you get an invite, or you will be considered politically incorrect," said one local university student. Another student complained, "I thought it was boring and useless" and "I didn't see a single student who sang these songs with passion." Other students criticised that the campaign had made Chongqing a "laughing stock" and even "jokingly turned red song into a verb, saying to one another 'I've been red songed. Have you been red songed?'"

While many of the older generation in Chongqing showed their support to the campaign, not all were fans and some were even critical. As a 60-year-old man commented: "It is just like the Cultural Revolution: They're using these big campaigns and movements to cover up their social problems." Xu's (2013) blog, as referred to earlier,

also revealed how some students at the Sichuan Foreign Languages Academy were forced by university authorities to participate in relevant red song events.

One student who participated in more than 100 rehearsals and performances in her first year at university, was told by her political instructor that participating in red song events was a “glorious” political task that would win the university reputation and thus she must go. As many students used various excuses to withdraw from continuing to attend such events, the university struggled in retaining existing and recruiting new participants. One incredible strategy they used (among other ones) was to add bonus marks to participants’ exam results at the end of the semester.

The significance and impact of the four major red song events were also not as great as they might look like. The significance of the two national red song concerts, which were ‘shows’ purposely organized by the Chongqing authorities, was largely symbolic and by no means suggested a nationwide red song fever generated by the SRS campaign. As to the Chongqing red song choir delegation’s 2011 Beijing trip, they were in fact invited by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles as part of a much larger celebration of the 90th anniversary of the CCP in Beijing (Nanfang Net, 2011). In the case of their performance in Hong Kong in 2012, it was actually organised by several low profile and insignificant left organizations in Hong Kong and was hardly a major event in any sense (Zheng, 2012). In spite of this, Bo-controlled Chongqing media showed no hesitation in portraying these events as exciting evidence that the SRS campaign was gaining surging national and even international influence (e.g., see Chongqing TV, 2012; Ji, 2011; Xiao & Lan, 2011; Zhang & Tan, 2010; Zhou & Chen, 2012a, 2012b).

To more accurately assess the general public’s perception of the SRS campaign, comments from China’s ‘netizens’ must not be overlooked. By the late 2000s and the early 2010s when the SRS campaign was launched and promoted, traditional media outlets in China were still strictly controlled, China’s digital revolution since the 2000s had contributed to the rise of online citizen journalism and democratic cyber activism (Guo, 2012; Xin, 2010; Yang, 2011). While a systematic research on online comments on the SRS campaign is beyond this study’s research scope, researching viewers’ comments on a typical red song event in a popular BBS may serve as an effective and efficient alternative research method.

The event used here is the second national red song concert held in Chongqing in June 2011 that was arguably the most influential mass red song event mobilised by the Chongqing authorities. The BBS of ifeng.com, a Beijing-based top Chinese-language Internet portal owned by Hong Kong-based Phoenix Satellite Television Holdings Limited, is chosen as the sample BBS for its high popularity among mainland Chinese internet users and importantly, its well maintained and extremely research-friendly archives of users’ follow-up comments on major news stories (no other Chinese BBS does a better job in this regard). A reprint of a news story about the concert from Chongqing’s officially controlled cq.cqnews.net titled “100,000 people attended Chongqing red song concert”, appeared on ifeng.com on 29 June 2011. The story quickly attracted a total of 1,632 user comments (including a considerable number of repeated posts) in a little more than a week from June 29, to July 6.<sup>2</sup> One does not have to be a political analyst nor look too hard to find that the overwhelming majority of those comments were clearly critical of Bo and his SRS campaign. Typical comments on the concert, Chongqing as a city, and/or the concert participants included: “funny”, “stupid”, “ridiculous”, “awful”, “appealing”, “sad”, “Oh, my God”, “incomprehensible”, “an ugly farce”, “waste of money”, “a bunch of idiots”, “Did they wear red-colour undies too?” “Is Chongqing going back to 1949?” “The Cultural Revolution is coming back”, “(I am) speechless”, “worried”, “scared”, “terrified”, “Rule the country by law, not by red songs”, “Chongqing should never be beaten by Pyongyang, do another red song concert with one million participants”, “Comrade Kim (Jong-un) should come to Chongqing to learn something”, and so on.

There was no lack of direct criticisms of Bo too: “Chongqing is crazy, Bo is crazy”, “(I am) feeling increasingly sick (of Bo)”, “(I) had hope on this man (Bo) but he is becoming hopeless now”, “(Bo is) opportunistic and insincere”, “(Bo is trying to) earn political capital”, “(the concert) like an emperor’s birthday party”, “Clown Bo will be judged by history”, and more. Chongqing authorities and Bo tried to quickly hit back at such criticisms. Typically, on 11 July 2011, propaganda chief of CCP Chongqing Committee He Shizhong arranged a lengthy interview with the *Chongqing Daily* in responding to “various doubts” and “noises” against the campaign from “a small minority”, particularly “certain people online” (Chongqing Daily, 2011). In this carefully crafted so-called “interview”, the anonymous interviewer (referred to as “the journalist”) and He (as the interviewee) collaborated perfectly in attempting to desperately defend the campaign.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, there were two profound flaws in Bo’s communication of his SRS campaign to the general public. As discussed earlier, locally in Chongqing, he ‘communicated’ the campaign to the Chongqing masses through a predominantly top-down approach via government controlled local media and officially organized mass red song events. It was not only a forced communication with little consultation and negotiation, but also a repressive communication without tolerating any open criticism of the campaign. Typically, for example, a young Chongqing village official Ren Jianyu was arrested in August 2011 after being found forwarding and commenting on more than 100 pieces of “negative information” online. Very importantly, another “suspected crime” of Ren collected by Chongqing police was his blunt online criticisms of Bo’s “Chongqing model”. Ren wrote:

“ Chongqing is holding up the flag of China’s second Cultural Revolution, (as we are) singing red song, having another Great Leap Forward, intending to boast, creating cult of personality, and showing no respect to law. Everything is so similar (to the Cultural Revolution). My suffering fellow citizens, I don’t know what to do to save you! (He, 2012) ”

Such criticisms were perhaps far more offensive than his other ‘suspected crimes’ in the eyes of Bo. Ren was given a two-year term in a labour camp for “incitement to subvert state power” without a court process one month after his arrest (He, 2012).

Nationally though, Bo could do little in influencing public opinions on the SRS campaign, his hard-line attitude on public criticisms of the campaign remained. Bo did not seem to see the necessity of communicating the campaign to the wider Chinese public seriously and carefully as he seemingly believed that they should naturally accept or swallow it for its ideological and moral ‘correctness’ and its proved ‘success’ in Chongqing. This may explain why he was both surprised and angry when facing criticisms of the campaign. For example, when he met with some artists who were attending the second national red song concert in Chongqing in June 2011, he denounced criticisms that had described the campaign as a mini Cultural Revolution as “absolutely nonsense”.

He also intended to challenge his critics by politicising the issue. In his own words:

“ I believe those who are clearheaded and have a sense of responsibility to the country and the nation, after careful study and thinking (about the campaign), would draw a correct conclusion on Chongqing’s ‘singing red song’ campaign (Xiao, 2011). ”

Later that same year, he went even further. He again challenged his critics by attempting to politicise the issue of ‘red’:

“ Some people say nothing about yellow (culture) but are extremely sensitive to red (culture); they remain silent about vulgar and passive things but complain immediately when hearing others talk about something upbeat or patriotic such as loving the Party, the country, and the people. We cannot help to ask, is being red not a good thing? The colour of our national flag is red, so is the colour of Tiananmen, shall we change their colour? (Xiao & Shang, 2011). ”

Such a completely inflexible and threatening approach by Bo was unlikely to win him much public support. Nor would it, as discussed below, earn him much sympathy from the CCP’s top leadership.

## Communicating the campaign to the CCP’s top leadership

As mentioned, the CCP’s top leadership as the most important target audience of Bo’s SRS campaign, had largely watched the unfolding of the campaign closely and patiently without showing a clear opinion/position on it until days before Bo’s sacking. Also as discussed, aligning to this official stance, state-owned traditional Chinese media beyond Chongqing as a whole took a similar approach by reporting without directly commenting on the campaign. In the meantime, subtly and significantly, online criticisms of the campaign seemingly had little trouble in ‘successfully’ breaching China’s normally extraordinarily effective firewalls – not only (though more typically) on comparatively freer BBSs such as that of ifeng.com, but also on more controlled local BBSs such as the *Qiangguo Forum* of the *People’s Daily*. It is also very important to know that not all traditional media outlets allowed Bo to have that much face.

The Guangzhou-based liberal-minded Southern Press Group was a typical, and powerful, exception. The Group’s popular outlets such as the *Southern Weekend* and the *Southern People Weekly* published series of reports to seriously question and challenge Bo’s ‘Chongqing model’ including the SRS campaign (e.g., see Chen, 2011; Chen & Jiang, 2011; Guo, 2009a, 2009b; He, 2011; Fang et al., 2010; Liu & Liao, 2013; Su & Nie, 2011; Ran & Zhao, 2010; Zhao, 2010). Such ‘exception’ implied two important developments in China’s political communication. The first one was the emergence of a more diverse and dynamic professional journalism in China after nearly two decades of media commercialization since the 1990s (e.g., see Chen, 2008; Huang, 2007; Lee, 1994, 2003; Lu & Pan, 2002; Pan & Chan, 2003). Another development was the emergence of competition between different social and economic developmental models initiated by local, particularly provincial, Party leaders who were supported by different factions within the CCP at the central level (e.g., see Li, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012). For example, Wang Yang, former Party secretary of Chongqing and currently Party secretary of Guangdong who was widely seen as Bo’s primary political competitor, was obviously unimpressed by Bo’s ‘Chongqing model’. And his reform-oriented and forward-looking ‘Guangdong model’ was widely seen as a direct response to Bo’s conservative and populist ‘Chongqing model’ (e.g., see *The Economist*, 2011).

There is little doubt that without the nod of Wang who was backed by the dominant reformist faction of the

CCP's top leadership, the Southern Press Group could hardly have been bold enough to risk openly questioning Bo's 'Chongqing model'. It should also be noted that the Chongqing red song choir delegation's Beijing trip in 2011, (as mentioned above), was also largely ignored by the CCP's top leadership. Bo sent a powerful delegation consisting of 14 singing groups with 1,000 singers to the capital city, obviously hoping that they would make some sort of impact in the country's political heart. But Bo received a cold response in Beijing as none of the nine powerful PSC members attended any of the six performances by his red song choir army. Ironically, Bo himself was actually the only high-ranking Party official who attended most of the six performances (Nanfang Net, 2011).

All this signalled the uncertain and somewhat ominous political fate of the SRS campaign. Politically, Bo apparently made a number of serious mistakes in his promotion of the SRS campaign. First, as discussed, in Chinese politics, few (if any) local leaders had ever been as bold and loud as Bo to talk about important ideological and ethical issues with national significance. It was, (and still is), a communist tradition that only the top leader of the ruling Communist Party had the legitimacy and authority to represent the whole party on such issues. As Wylie (1980, p. 59) noted:

“ [t]he ideal of unity of theory and practice embodied in one leading individual was deeply ingrained in the Marxist-Leninist tradition—as, indeed, it was in Chinese political tradition in general. ”

No one else in the top leadership, let alone a local leader, was allowed to challenge this rule. Other (including local) CCP leaders might have their own 'experience' or 'model' under the domain of the top leader's grand theory but there was no room for them to behave like a top ideologist as Bo did. In other words, politically, the fundamental issue with Bo's SRS campaign was that it should really not have happened in the first place.

Second, it was difficult not to see Bo's forceful and passionate promotion of the SRS campaign as other than a far-fetched and hypocritical political show. In contemporary Chinese politics, it is not uncommon for politicians to talk up the CCP's 'red' revolutionary tradition. But one just cannot pretend that he or she is passionately serious about it unless one wants to be seen as hypocritical or stubborn and out of touch. By the time the SRS campaign was launched in 2008, Maoist revolutionary ethics had long lost its grip on the nation with the rise of modern, universal values such as individualism, consumerism, freedom of speech, and political transparency after three decades of reform and opening (e.g., see MacFarquhar, 1997; Wang, 2011). The SRS campaign might win some support from certain strata of the Chinese society (for example, leftists and marginalized social groups), very few would believe that the campaign (or any similar officially mobilised mass political movement), would solve the deep institutionally and historically embedded ideological and moral crisis facing the Party and the country.

In any sense, the contrast between Bo's passionate promotion of the campaign and his privileged social status as a communist princeling, the enormous power and wealth he held as a high-ranking Party leader living in the heart of China's institutionally corrupt political system, was just too striking. A common sense knowledge of Chinese politics would lead to the question: how could it be possible for Bo to claim the moral high ground by painting himself as the leader of a mass moral education movement? Indeed, it was little surprise to political analysts and ordinary Chinese alike when Bo was sacked for behaving immorally: corruption, abuse of power, and sex scandals (Xinhua, 2012; see also Demick, 2013).

Third and last, Bo's frequent, high-profile presence in media interviews and mass red song events may also have been a politically reckless strategy. Long before he was appointed as the Party chief of Chongqing, Bo had been well known for his flamboyant and arrogant personality (Wines, 2012). Compared with Chinese officials' traditional image of being dull, dumb, and anonymous, Bo was fresh and eloquent and loved showing off before the media and crowds. But again, in China's political-communication context, it was probably politically unwise for Bo as a local leader to attract too much limelight. When Bo was cheerfully talking to local, national, and even international media, making speeches before a sea of red song concert participants, or leading the crowds to sing red songs (e.g., see Chongqing TV, 2012; Du, 2008), he was apparently attempting to create some sort of personal charisma. Indeed, in many ways, he was behaving more like a national leader, or at least the best local leader. A classic example was at the opening ceremony of the second national red song concert held in Chongqing in June 2011. Bo was conceitedly standing shoulder to shoulder with former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who had been invited to attend the event (Chongqing TV, 2012). The event may have reawakened a seemingly excited Kissinger's memory of the Maoist mass mobilisation he had witnessed in the 1970s when he was helping President Richard Nixon craft his new China policy. But by watching the footage, one can hardly dismiss the impression that this time around, he looked more like an awkward guest invited by an awkward politician to decorate an awkward political show.<sup>4</sup>

Bo's attempt to use Kissinger to increase his political publicity and endorse his SRS campaign was a highly risky move. In Chinese politics, it was an extremely unusual practice for a local leader to appear together with a 'heavyweight' foreigner like Kissinger before a mass political gathering unless he or she wanted to be seen as being politically ambitious. As Li (2012) has noted, Bo's self-promotion strategy was "aggressive" (p. 132) and "remarkably unconventional" (2012:141). In spite of the "growing openness of self-promotion campaigns" by



other ambitious local politicians, none of them went nearly as far as Bo did (2012:138 and 140-141).

By late 2011, in spite of facing growing political pressure over his SRS campaign, Bo still tried to ensure local Party officials that the campaign was going well and supported by the 'top'. In his speech at a plenary session of the CCP Chongqing Committee in December 2011, Bo boasted that six of the nine PSC members had visited Chongqing and showed their support to the campaign. In the same speech, he also proudly mentioned that even Henry Kissinger and Helmut Schmidt (former Chancellor of the Social Democratic Party of Germany) showed "great interest" in the campaign (Xiao & Shang, 2011). But this 'success' was more illusion than reality. Bo failed to mention that Party chief Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, and Vice-premier Li Keqiang (three powerful reform-minded figures in the top leadership) were notably not among the six PSC members who visited Chongqing. And in fact, even those PSC members who did visit did not explicitly endorse the campaign, rather only praising it in a very generalised way. Most of them treated it cautiously as an interesting and useful local practice rather than a campaign with national significance. The Party's then propaganda chief Li Changchun was reportedly the only one who at one point called for promoting the campaign nationally (DWNNews.com, 2010), though it never happened till Bo's fall.

On February 6, 2012, Chongqing police chief and Bo Xilai's right-hand man Wang Lijun, secretly entered the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu reportedly seeking political asylum or refuge from Bo because of serious political infighting between the two men. The scandal triggered Bo's final fall from power. On 14 March 2012, the eve of Bo's formal sacking by his Party, Premier Wen said the Chongqing authorities must 'seriously' reflect and learn from the incident. He also repeatedly made references to the disastrous damage caused by the Cultural Revolution during his annual end-of-parliamentary session press conference (The Economist, 2012), signalling clearly his and the CCP top leadership's collective rejection of Bo's SRS campaign and his 'Chongqing model'.

## Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, this study concludes that the SRS campaign as a political communication project, in its entirety, failed to effectively communicate to its target audience. The campaign was profoundly flawed in terms of both its nature and the way it was promoted. A number of important lessons can be drawn from the case here:

Firstly, attempting to restore the CCP's conservative 'red' culture as the dominant ethics in contemporary China is an extremely difficult, if not historically impossible, task. Remaining in the deep shadow of Mao's ghost, the SRS campaign obviously clashed with the present trend of Chinese modernity, which is characterized by a rising tide of interest from the Chinese public (particularly the more educated and technologically wired middle class) in such universal values as individualism, consumerism, capitalist life style, and liberalism (e.g., see Wang, 2011; Wang, Rees, & Andreosso-O'callaghan, 2004; Yang, 2011). There was also a widely shared consensus in the Chinese society that the ongoing severe social-political and ideological-moral challenges facing the nation must be tackled only by moving forward through further reform and opening rather than backward by introducing a neo-Maoist political economy and red culture (e.g., see Tang, 2005; Wang ed., 2011; Wang, Rees, & Andreosso-O'callaghan, 2004). Bo should certainly not have expected that he could simply recycle outdated conservative ideas and dump them in China's increasingly diverse and dynamic public arena through the Chongqing media under his control and that the whole nation would automatically accept them. The SRS campaign was highly unlikely to win over the majority of society and become mainstream nationwide. There simply was not enough room for Bo to play a hypocritical and opportunistic game.

Secondly, Bo also failed to fully understand, or pay much attention to, the political communication logic he faced when promoting the campaign. As discussed earlier, in China's political communication context, not every politician is allowed to talk about important macro ethical and ideological issues. Strictly speaking, it is nearly a political 'crime' for Bo as a local leader to launch the SRS campaign for his own political ambition and literally force the CCP's top leadership to accept it.

Thirdly, Bo might have been eloquent and media-savvy as many suggested, but he was hardly a sensible and intelligent political communicator. He should not have behaved like he would be able to simply inject his SRS campaign into the mind of his audiences through a top-down communication approach just because he controlled enormous political and media resources. Power does not necessarily bring about successful political communication.

Bo's arrogance and ignorance of China's rapidly changing political, social, and media-communication environment, left him oblivious to the fact that his application of the Maoist magic bullet theory of mass communication (see Chu, 1977; Chu & Hsu, 1979; Liu, 1971) just would not work in 21st century China. Indeed, we have seen very little 'communication' (interaction and negotiation between the 'campaigner' and the 'audience') in the promotion of the campaign. Bo, ironically a postgraduate in international journalism and a self-appointed communication mastermind (see Xu, 2013), behaved more like a typical old-style communist propagandist rather than a modern political communication strategist. His political and communication talents were likely far overstated by his supporters and some media outlets. Many of his high-ranking peers like former Vice-premier Wu Yi, current Vice-premier Wang Qishan, and Party chief of Guangdong Wang Yang were highly

popular for their political and communicative talents too, though they all remained sensibly low-key.

Last but not least, Bo's failure in the promotion of the SRS campaign also reflected fundamental flaws in both his personality, and China's current political system at large. Under China's one-party political system, any politician in a similar position to that of Bo could have behaved just as badly as Bo did if he or she wanted to. There has been no functional institutional regime of checks and balances to either prevent irresponsible or corrupt political behaviours or to stop such behaviours before they go horribly wrong. In other words, the so-called 'historical logic' regarding China's social-political transition as discussed earlier has not yet been transformed into a democratic 'institutional logic'. This is probably the most politically significant lesson from the case of the SRS campaign and the Bo Xilai saga as a whole. In addition, Bo's flawed personality also played a big role in the failure of his SRS campaign (and his political fall at large). As Michael Wines (2012) of *The New York Times* has observed, "[f]or all his success, the seeds of Mr. Bo's destruction were evident long ago". As a result of this, his "undisputed talents were counterbalanced by what friends and critics alike say was an insatiable ambition and studied indifference to the wrecked lives that littered his path to power". To a large extent, Bo was a victim of his personality, his power, and his obsession for greater power.

## Notes

1 This research project is funded by the Urban Infrastructure Group, RMIT Global Cities Institute, RMIT University, Australia.

2 The original news story and users' follow-up comments may be found at: [http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/jiandang90nian/content-2/detail\\_2011\\_06/29/7325211\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/jiandang90nian/content-2/detail_2011_06/29/7325211_0.shtml)

3 The full-text of the interview can be found at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2011-07/11/c\\_121647601.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2011-07/11/c_121647601.htm)

4 The footage may be found at: <http://video.ahwang.cn/information/2012/0315/1128697.shtml>

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