

Political Scandals Under Responsive Authoritarianism: The Case of the Bo Xilai Trial in China

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This article examines the corruption scandal and trial of Chinese political leader Bo Xilai in 2012 and 2013 and the discourses associated with the scandal in the years afterward. It focuses on how mainstream media discourses portrayed the trial, discussed the problem of official corruption, and articulated the notion of the rule of law in the context of responsive authoritarianism. The Bo Xilai trial differed substantially from the typical mediated scandal event in liberal democracies. The case illustrated how political scandals in contemporary China can be occasions for power holders to present an image of being willing to address public concerns and determined to solve social problems. The analysis also suggests that political scandals can provide opportunities for the articulation and propagation of the power holders' preferred conception of social and political reform.

Keywords: political scandal, responsive authoritarianism, media discourse, rule of law, China

In a widely cited volume, Markovits and Silverstein (1988) proclaimed that "scandals can only occur in liberal democracies" (p. 8). Similarly, Neckel (2005) argued that, except for scandals that are staged by power holders as part of internal power struggles, there are no scandals in dictatorships because scandals are conceivable only where "non-violent delegitimation of political power is possible" (p. 103). However, most contemporary societies are neither full-fledged democracies nor extreme dictatorships. Notions such as hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism, and various "democracies with adjectives" have highlighted the possible complexities of regimes (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Levitsky & Way, 2010). In actual authoritarian countries, nonviolent delegitimation of political power is possible, if only to a limited degree. Political scandals do occur in varying contexts with different dynamics and implications (Kim, 2014; Toepfl, 2011).

In the past decade, scholars have developed concepts such as consultative, networked, and contentious authoritarianism to characterize the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

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Underlying these notions is the idea that the authoritarian system in China has developed a (limited) degree of (selective) responsiveness to public opinion, which has contributed to regime resilience in times of social and economic change (Nathan, 2003). This is also the background against which phenomena such as media commercialization and the rise of protests can be understood.

This article situates the emergence of high-profile corruption scandals in China involving top government leaders within the context of responsive authoritarianism. The analysis focuses on the Bo Xilai corruption scandal. In one sense, the case of Bo, governor of Chongqing and second son of first-generation CCP leader Bo Yibo, can be considered a scandal driven by internal power struggles in an authoritarian regime. But when tied to responsive authoritarianism, a couple of questions emerge: How did the media represent the problem of official corruption and construct an image of a government determined to address the problem? How are the boundaries of media discourses managed such that the radical potential of an emphasis on responsiveness can be smoothed?

Tackling these questions should enhance our understanding of the characteristics and significance of political scandals in contemporary China. The article also contributes to the study of scandals in varying political systems. The next section discusses the possible differences of scandals in varying contexts. The article then further discusses the notion of responsive authoritarianism and the Chinese media system. The analysis is then presented, and the implications of this research are discussed.

Political Scandals as Mediated Events

For this article, scandals are defined as the communicative events following the public revelation of acts of moral transgression committed by political actors. This definition is consistent with the literature's emphasis on scandals as communication patterns (Esser & Hartung, 2004; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004), but it differs from definitions by Thompson (2000) and West (2008) by not treating the expression of public disapproval as a core characteristic of scandals. For a study on scandals in nondemocracies, it is advisable to adopt a minimalist definition that does not take for granted all the features of scandals in liberal democracies.

Many studies of political scandals have conceptualized the scandal event as involving a number of phases. Kantola and Vesa (2013) adopted Turner's (1974) theorization of social dramas and argued that a scandal typically has four phases: a breach of social norms, a crisis in which the breach widens, the undertaking of redressive actions, and reintegration of the disturbed social group or the recognition of irreparable schisms. Similarly, Jimenez (2004) identified six phases of a scandal: (1) the revelation of a wrongdoing, (2) the publication of the wrongdoing, (3) defense attempts by the protagonists, (4) dramatization of conflicts, (5) prosecution or institutional redress, and (6) stigmatization of the protagonist. Meanwhile, Burkhardt (2006) adopted a drama analogy and introduced the concept of the "scandal clock," which sees a scandal as involving the stages of latency, upswing, establishment, downswing, and rehabilitation (cited in Benthien, 2016).

Whether these models are entirely applicable to authoritarian countries is an open question. On the one hand, even by a minimalist definition, any scandal has to begin with the revelation of a breach of

norms. Redressive actions are also likely to be involved at some point. In other words, when understood schematically, the models discussed above may still be able to aid the analysis of scandals in authoritarian systems. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that scandals in authoritarian countries would exhibit all the phases. Even if the phases exist, what occurs in each phase may differ. For instance, in liberal democracies, the revelation of moral transgressions by politicians often comes from the work of investigative journalists, though leaks by politicians or other kinds of whistleblowers can also be crucial (Balan, 2011; Liebes & Blum-Kulka, 2004). Writing in the early 2000s, Liebes and Blum-Kulka (2004) noted the phenomenon of scandals arising from live talk-show interviewees violating the norms of accepted social behavior. In more recent years, scandals can arise from revelations through digital media platforms (Porksen & Detel, 2014). In contrast, in a prototypical authoritarian country without a free press and a free Internet, the revelation of transgressions could simply be an official pronouncement.

Thompson (2000) saw the emergence of opprobrious discourses as a crucial feature of scandals. Media coverage defines what is wrong in a reported transgression, signifies the seriousness of the matter, and elicits and represents public outrage (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012; Kepplinger, Geiss, & Siebert, 2012). However, the press does not always succeed in constructing or generating a universal condemnation of the transgression. In some cases, scandals lead to clashes between values in a heterogeneous moral order (Jacobsson & Lofmarck, 2008). In yet other cases, a scandal may be framed differently by politicians on different sides of the political divide (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002). In other words, scandals can involve the discursive contestations and negotiations regarding the nature, seriousness, and/or public relevance of a wrongdoing (Fischle, 2000). The occurrence of these contestations and negotiations, however, is largely premised on a public arena where diverse political views can be expressed. In authoritarian countries, one may expect the power holders to more tightly control the definition of the transgression. Contestation of meanings is less likely to occur.

This latter argument also implies that scandals in authoritarian countries are likely to be less open-ended. In democratic countries, it is widely recognized that a minor moral transgression can lead to serious consequences due to attempts of concealment or other inappropriate responses by the implicated politician (Thompson, 2000). In authoritarian countries, to the extent that the scandal is staged and managed by the state, the script of the event is more likely to be followed through to the end.

Certainly, the contrast described here between scandals in democratic and authoritarian countries is simplified and tentative. As noted earlier, many regimes are neither democratic nor authoritarian in the ideal-typical form. Some scandals in authoritarian countries can assume some of the characteristics of scandals in democratic countries, and vice versa. This article cannot fully discuss the possible varieties of scandals in different political systems. It focuses on a state-initiated corruption trial in China. The working assumption is that the trial can be seen as deliberately staged and carefully managed to propagate meanings that serve the interests of the rulers. We expect little, though not necessarily the complete absence of, discursive contestation. More precisely interpreting the significance of the scandal requires an explication of the Chinese political context.

Two points should be noted here. First, this study goes beyond the typical analysis of scandals by examining not only the scandal event but also how a scandal may become a "news icon" (Bennett &

Lawrence, 1995) in subsequent news discourses. A prominent scandal can become the lens through which people make sense of subsequent events. A classic example is the Watergate scandal in the United States (Schudson, 1993). Examining how a scandal appears in public discourses over time can enrich our understanding of the significance of the scandal. Here, there could also be a difference between democracies and authoritarian countries. For Bennett and Lawrence (1995), news icons are cultural symbols limiting the state's influence on the media. But in authoritarian countries, news icons are likely to be propagated by the state to serve the interests of the dominant power.

Second, the differences between China and various democratic countries are not always rooted in the varying political systems. As Esser and Hartung (2004) point out, there are cultural differences among democratic countries in terms of whether certain acts are seen as scandalous and whether the media would report on certain types of transgressions. Similarly, the cultural values and norms of China may influence the identification of transgression and the dynamics of scandals. Although the cultural perspective is less central to this study given its focus on the presumably universally condemned act of corruption, one should keep in mind the possibility that cultural as well as political factors can shape a scandal event.

Responsive Authoritarianism and the Media System in China

Since the early 2000s, many scholars have tried to explain the resilience of the CCP regime. He and Thøgersen (2010) tackled the question through the concept of consultative authoritarianism, understood as a system involving "different ways of channeling public opinion and political energy into the political decision-making process without abandoning the principle of the CCP's monopoly on political power" (p. 676). The Chinese government had established various "input institutions" (Nathan, 2003). It allowed the emergence of civil society associations in order to improve the provision of public goods (Teets, 2013). Surveys found that the new channels of public opinion expression did foster more positive public opinion toward the government (Truex, 2017).

Other scholars developed other concepts for similar purposes. Chen (2012) used the term *contentious authoritarianism* to describe how an authoritarian government can coexist with the rise of protests. MacKinnon (2013) coined the term *networked authoritarianism* to refer to China's sophisticated system of Internet control, which combines censorship with a range of other techniques. Under this system, negative views toward the government are often allowed if they do not lead to collective actions (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013).

Common to various conceptualizations of authoritarianisms is the recognition that the Chinese regime had been more responsive to public demand. Despite the high levels of selectivity involved (Su & Meng, 2016) and the presence of other political motivations, the increased responsiveness could boost regime legitimacy, partly because the input institutions might indeed improve government performance and partly because of the image of a government willing to listen to the public. This article uses the term *responsive authoritarianism* (Hurst, 2016) to describe such a ruling approach. The term points more directly to the basic rationale of the system and covers a wider range of institutions and practices enhancing the actual or perceived responsiveness of the system.

The scandals and trials of top government leaders such as Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang can be understood against the background of responsive authoritarianism.² It should be noted that rampant corruption within the Chinese Communist regime has long been a source of strong public discontent (Sun, 2001). The mediated public revelation, communication, and condemnation of the corruption practices of powerful politicians thus constitute scandals as defined earlier. Admittedly, observers of Chinese politics have often pointed out that the selective enforcement of anticorruption is tied to the politics of economic development and intraparty power struggles (Guo, 2014). The punishment meted out is influenced by calculations of political costs and preferred deterrent effects (Zhu, 2015). However, high-profile corruption trials undoubtedly also served the purpose of appeasing the discontented public. We can expect the trials to serve as mediated events through which the images of governmental responsiveness and the rule of law are constructed.

The challenge faced by the state during corruption scandals is to contain public discourses so that the preferred framing of the event will dominate and alternative readings will be suppressed. Achieving a unified framing should not be a difficult task when mainstream media discourses are concerned. The Chinese mainstream media remains tightly controlled by the state. All media organizations are under the supervision of the propaganda departments at various levels. More recently, President Xi Jinping paid high-profile visits to several state media in February 2016, reiterating the necessity for the media to toe the party line (Wang, Sparks, Lu, & Huang, 2017, p. 155).

Granted, economic and media reform since the early 1990s had led to the rise of the "commercial press" and journalistic professionalization (Pan & Chan, 2003). However, journalistic professionalism tends to be understood by Chinese journalists in ways that differ from the liberal tradition. There is a much weaker emphasis on autonomy from political power (Simons, Nolan, & Wright, 2017). In terms of practice, investigative journalism flourished in the early 2000s, which led to the growth of scandals, many of which surrounded corporate misconduct (e.g., the Sanlu milk scandal in 2008). However, there were severe constraints on topics and targets. Most of the time, journalists were allowed only to "swat the flies" and not "beat the tigers" (Wang & Lee, 2014). Scandals involving top government leaders remained rare. Moreover, many commercial papers would not challenge the government. Instead, they function like the state's publicity agent, offering softer and more entertaining contents while helping the CCP to establish a positive image (Lee, He, & Huang, 2006). The limited differentiation between the commercial and party papers nonetheless created a differential in perceived credibility, and official ideologies promulgated by the commercial papers could "guide" public opinion more effectively (Stockmann, 2013).

As a result, the diversity within the Chinese media system is discernable mainly when nonsensitive social news is concerned (Wang et al., 2017). We can expect a highly unified approach by the Chinese media to covering political scandals involving top government leaders. Nevertheless, we might still ask whether the most market-oriented media outlet would offer any information or discourses that

² Zhou Yongkang was former state security chief and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP between 2007 and 2012. He was charged for bribery, revealing state secrets, and abuse of power. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in June 2015.

might be understood as alternative within the Chinese context. That is, we can still try to discern the outer boundaries of the discourses allowed in such cases.

Case Background and Material Collection

This study focuses on the corruption scandal and trial of Communist Party Secretary of Chongqing, Bo Xilai. Chongqing is a major city in southwestern China, and the party secretary is the city's de facto leader. Bo's identity as a "princeling" and a rising political star made the event particularly prominent. Adding to the dramatic qualities of the case, the trial of Bo was preceded by the "defection" of the Chongqing police chief, Wang Lijun, to the U.S. embassy and the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood by Bo's wife, Gu Kailai.

Meng (2016) analyzed the Bo Xilai case in relation to the continual significance of ideological struggles to media politics in the globalized mediascape. She noted that the trial can be read as part of the conflict between national leaders who supported the continuation of neoliberal policies and political elites (including Bo) who adopted a more socialist and equalitarian ideology. She noted that the Chinese media expectedly adhered closely to the line of the central government. Discussions of power struggles within the CCP appeared largely in the international media and the offshore media in Hong Kong. However, driven by commercialism, even the international media tended to focus on the human drama and treated the trial largely as a depoliticized spectacle.

The present study does not challenge Meng's (2016) interpretation, but its analytical focus differs in three ways. First, this study emphasizes the background of responsive authoritarianism instead of the ideological struggle among elites. Second, this study presents a more detailed analysis of media discourses—something that was absent in Meng's work. Third, the materials analyzed cover the three years after the trial. Since the construction of responsive authoritarianism is an ongoing endeavor, it is meaningful to examine whether and how a scandal can become a news icon utilized by the media for specific rhetorical purposes.

As pointed out earlier, scandals involving top government leaders are exceptional in China. However, such highly prominent yet sensitive cases are where the tension between responsiveness and authoritarianism is the most conspicuous and needs to be carefully managed. In addition, only highly prominent cases such as the trial of Bo Xilai have the potential to become news icons. Therefore, although the case of Bo may not be representative in the statistical sense, it should be the most illustrative of the nature and limits of the politics of scandals under responsive authoritarianism.

Methodologically, the materials for the analysis were derived from a keyword search in Wise News using "Bo Xilai" as a keyword. The analysis focuses on *People's Daily* (PD) and *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (SMD). The former is the most authoritative Communist Party newspaper in China, whereas the latter is the exemplar of commercialized newspapers. The two papers are at the two ends of a spectrum: The PD is most likely to play the role of a loyal facilitator promulgating the party line, whereas SMD is more likely to play the watchdog role (Wang et al., 2017). Therefore, the differences between the two newspapers' coverage of an issue are indicative of the extent of heterogeneity in media

discourses allowed by the state on the issue. However, the differences between the two papers are likely to disappear when sensitive political news is concerned (Stockmann, 2013).

In fact, the total amount of coverage of the case was not huge. The search yielded only 138 PD articles and 86 SMD articles, including news reports, commentaries, and editorials. The small numbers suggest that the newspapers were not completely free to report the event on a scale that matched its significance. A cursory look at the SMD articles indicates that the newspaper often relied on reports from Xinhua News Agency. That is, the newspaper was seemingly required to directly adopt the coverage by major state media.

A textual analysis was conducted. Specifically, the articles were read closely to identify the major themes and rhetorical devices used to construct images of Bo Xilai, the court trial, and the legal and political system. The analysis is inductive and interpretive, and, in line with the principles of various traditions of textual or discourse analysis (e.g., Fairclough, 1995), the texts were interpreted against its context—the broader political context as outlined earlier and the immediate context of the evolution of the scandal event. The interpretation and reading were iterative—that is, when certain interpretations of some of the articles or themes were derived, the articles were reread to ascertain whether the interpretations were justified or would be contradicted by other materials in the corpus. The process ended when a holistic, relatively coherent, and contextualized account of the texts was developed.

Given the controlled character of the coverage and the relatively small number of articles, it would not be very meaningful to focus on the phase structures of the mediated scandal event. Rather, through the analysis, it was discovered that the ideological implications of the discourses can be meaningfully deciphered by focusing on four issues: the portrayal of Bo Xilai and the use of Bo as a news icon, the portrayal of the trial and the rule of law, the role of “the people,” and the presence of discourses that may be regarded as stretching the boundary of the dominant discourse.

The Image of Bo

On March 15, 2012, Xinhua News Agency reported that Bo Xilai had been relieved from his role as the Communist Party secretary of Chongqing. On April 10, the news agency further reported that Bo was under formal investigation. The respective news reports in *People's Daily* on March 16 and April 11 were very brief (fewer than 100 words). Nevertheless, PD published a commentary titled “Embracing the Correct Decision of the Party Center With Determination.” The article was printed by *Southern Metropolitan Daily* on the same day. SMD published its own editorial, similarly headlined “Embracing the Correct Decision of the Party Center With Concrete Actions,” on April 12. The piece read like a revised version of the PD commentary.

These initial reports and commentaries presented no public outcries and no concrete identification of the transgressions committed by Bo. PD's commentary, for instance, stated that, “based on published facts”:

the Wang Lijun incident is a serious political event causing adverse effects . . . ; the death of Neil Heywood is a serious crime involving the family and close aides of Party and national leaders; the deeds of Bo Xilai seriously violated Party discipline, adversely affecting the program and greatly damaging the image of the Party and the nation. (*People's Daily*, April 11, 2012, p. 1)

Without clear specification of Bo's crime, media discourses relied on generalized adjectives and the presumed negative influence of the various incidents to construct Bo's transgression. The passage listed the Wang Lijun incident, the death of Heywood, and Bo's own violation of party discipline together. Although Bo was certainly related to the two earlier incidents, at the time of the article's publication, it was unclear in what ways Bo was a culprit in them. The listing of the three incidents together, however, added weight to the seriousness of the situation and made the investigation seemingly justified.

The transgressions of Bo were further elaborated on September 28, 2012, when the CCP announced the expulsion of Bo from the party. PD's report the next day stated:

[Bo] abused the power of his position in the Wang Lijun incident and the murder by Gu Kailai . . . ; he used his position to seek benefits for others, receiving bribes from others directly and through his family; . . . he maintained inappropriate sexual relationships with numerous women; he violated the personnel discipline of the organization and committed mistakes in managing people. (*People's Daily*, September 29, 2012, p. 1)

On the one hand, the passage is indicative of what kinds of misdeeds would be deemed pertinent to the integrity of a political leader in the Chinese political culture (e.g., the reference to sexual relationships with numerous women and to "personnel discipline"). On the other hand, even here, the specification of Bo's transgression lacks the details one might expect from news coverage, such as the exact ways Bo abused his position in the Wang Lijun incident and the Heywood murder and the amount of money involved in the bribery. Certainly, even in democracies, the details of a scandal are often revealed only incrementally as a result of investigation, but the initiation of a typical scandal would still require information specific enough to sustain the dramatization of the transgression and generate public outcry, which may then lead to institutional responses. The Bo Xilai scandal did not begin with the dramatization of the transgression; rather, it began directly with institutional redress, and the characterization of the transgression was kept vague in the earliest stage.

The above description may appear to contradict the notion of responsive authoritarianism due to the lack of informational transparency, but more details of the case were indeed available during the publicized trial in summer 2013. Notably, when covering the trial, both PD and SMD abided by the norm and format of largely factual reporting. The coverage apparently privileged the prosecution over the defense through subtle word choices and the amount of space allocated. Yet one cannot easily judge whether the imbalance constituted bias or an accurate reflection of the relative strengths of the evidence and arguments of the two sides.

In contrast to the reserved character of the portrayal of Bo during the trial, the media started to employ highly derogatory terms to refer to Bo after the verdict was confirmed—for example, calling him a “rotted figure” with an “inflated ego” who “despised the law” and “let greed swallow his beliefs.” Bo became a symbol signifying a series of immoral qualities: “defected politically, greedy financially, corrupted morally, and decayed in everyday life” (*People’s Daily*, August 4, 2015, p. 20).

One might interpret the stigmatization of Bo as a case of denouncing the bad apple in order to reconfirm the group’s integrity. Nonetheless, since the Bo Xilai trial, a number of other corruption trials involving high-level government leaders have occurred. By the latter half of 2016, the Chinese media would mention Bo almost invariably together with four other top leaders—Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong, and Ling Jihua—who were charged for corruption.³ The dominant discourse walked a fine line between treating the group as “an absolute minority” (*People’s Daily*, December 7, 2016) and acknowledging that there was a more widespread problem. As an SMD piece put it:

The amendment of the “rule” is urgently needed for the strict governing of the Party. . . . Over a period of time, some Party leadership in local and department units have weakened . . . disciplined loosened; governing of the Party was too soft. (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, November 14, 2016, p. A4)

Passages such as this one function to establish the necessity and urgency of the problem of “internal discipline,” but doing so implies that the “discipline problem” was not restricted to an absolute minority. This contradiction between two characterizations illustrates the challenge of justifying the need of the current leaders’ reform program without undermining the credibility of the party.

The Trial Process and the Rule of Law

From the beginning of the event, the media emphasized that the investigation of Bo signified the government’s determination to uphold the rule of law. An SMD editorial wrote that “to investigate the case is to follow public opinion. It highlights . . . our Party and government’s intention to defend Party discipline and the nation’s law” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, April 12, 2012, p. A21). The trial of Bo was also treated as signifying the government’s willingness to not only “swat the flies” but also “beat the tigers.” The same editorial explicitly stated: “no matter who is involved and regardless of the person’s rank, one would not be excused when the Party discipline and the law are violated” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, April 12, 2012, p. A21).

However, these statements might be dismissed as empty rhetoric, and the trial of top leaders may be read by people as sheer power struggles. To avoid the latter reading, the trial needs to be seen as

³ Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou were retired People’s Liberation Army generals. They were charged for bribery. Guo was sentenced to life imprisonment, and Xu died of cancer during the process of the court trial. Ling Jihua was head of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of CCP. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for charges of corruption, illegal possession of state secrets, and abuse of power.

just and fair. When the trial started, a remarkable characteristic of media coverage is the detailed description of the court procedures. An SMD article, for instance, devoted a full paragraph to the trial procedures:

Under the chief judge's moderation, defendant Bo Xilai offered his accounts. . . . The court investigated the facts in the charge against Bo Xilai. The prosecutor and the defense counsel separately questioned the defendant and cross-examined [a witness]. The prosecutor showed various evidence, including documents, witness testimonies, and video recordings of witness-questioning. There was thorough examination of the evidence by the two sides. During the trial, the court granted all requests to speak by Bo Xilai. The defendant and his lawyer adequately expressed their views. (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, August 23, 2013, p. A10)

The paragraph did not include the specific facts of the case or the opinions of Bo and his lawyer. Some of the information exists in other parts of the article, but the report deemed the procedures themselves newsworthy enough to be given extensive treatment. What SMD had done was not unique. Similar accounts of the procedures also appeared in PD's reports.

Of course, the paragraph is not a nonjudgmental description of the happenings in court. The procedures were characterized positively—for example, there was “thorough” examination of the evidence, and Bo had “adequate” chances to speak. In the media discourses, these procedures themselves became the evidence of the CCP's respect for the rule of law. A PD article wrote:

from establishing the case for investigation, to prosecution, to the trial, and then to the court's verdict, the whole process is based on facts and governed by laws. It manifested the spirit of the rule of law and judiciary justice. (*People's Daily*, September 23, 2013, p. 1)

The fairness of the trial was even acknowledged by Bo himself. Another PD report stated:

Bo Xilai expressed his gratitude to the chief judge for the fairness of the trial; [he expressed] that the trial has been humane and civilized. . . . Throughout the previous 16 months, officers in-charge of the investigation had taken good care of me; the majority of them are well-educated and speak in a civil manner. . . . This trial gave the two sides adequate opportunities to express their views, and information was disseminated via Weibo. This enhanced my confidence in the future of the Chinese legal system. (*People's Daily*, August 28, 2013, p. 6)

Regardless of the sincerity and intention of Bo's statements, the acknowledgment created the image of a consensus on the two sides that the trial was fair. Notably, the dissemination of information via Weibo was mentioned. In fact, one oft-discussed characteristic of the Bo Xilai trial was the “direct broadcast” through the social media platform Weibo. Here, one needs to be precise about the nature of the direct broadcast. It was direct broadcast by text rather than audiovisual images. The broadcast had the quality of being in

real time, but it still relied on the reporter to decide what to write and what to omit. Textual direct broadcast thus allowed the legal system to claim a high degree of transparency without sacrificing its control of information dissemination.

Although there had been Weibo broadcasts of court trials in China before, the Bo Xilai case was arguably the first highly prominent trial adopting the practice. The broadcast was considered a success by the media. A PD article on November 13, 2013, stated that the Weibo direct broadcast was "highly significant," because "this way of publicizing information has to a large extent fulfilled citizens' right to know . . . and played a role in educating people about the legal system." After the trial, the direct broadcast arrangement would still be occasionally cited as a milestone in the development of a more transparent legal system. A PD article on March 18, 2014, hailed the establishment of the "direct broadcast network" of the Chinese court system. An SMD article stated: "the eye-catching case [of Bo Xilai] presented an opportunity. . . . The People's Court should actively develop new ways of publicizing trials" (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, May 14, 2014, p.AIII04)

In sum, proceduralism and transparency were the twin values emphasized in media discourses surrounding the Bo Xilai trial. The image constructed is of a legal system undergoing positive developments so that the rights of the people involved in court cases and the public's right to know are increasingly protected.

The People in the Court

Representation of public opinion is usually treated as a core component of the mediated scandal event. Although the Bo Xilai scandal did not begin with the dramatization of the outburst of public condemnation, public responses were not completely absent in the media.

In Chinese political discourses, *qunzhong* and *renmin* were the most commonly used terms for referring to the people. *Renmin* can be literally translated as "the people," and *qunzhong* can be translated as either "crowd" or "mass" depending on the circumstances. *Gongmin*, the Chinese phrase for "the public," is not widely used in everyday news discourse. These considerations point to the fact that the image of people as a collective actor capable of reasoning about public affairs is not well established in everyday and media discourses. In the Chinese Communists' worldview, people are "masses" that need to be led and educated by the party. In fact, in news reports and commentaries surrounding the Bo Xilai trial, the terms *qunzhong* and *renmin* seldom appeared alone. Instead, the phrase *ganbu qunzhong* was often employed—that is, party cadres (*ganbu*) and the masses were treated as constituting one collective actor.

Against this linguistic background, midlevel party cadres and academics in the coverage are not only official or expert sources; they were arguably included in the news for expressing the views of the people. For instance, a few days after the announcement of the investigation of Bo Xilai, PD quoted a county-level political consultative committee vice chairperson in the Henan Province for her support of the decision and her praise of the party's determination to clamp down on corruption (*People's Daily*, April 14, 2012). Although the quoted person was a party cadre, her official position had no direct connection with

the case. Quotes from her and other similar sources combined to generate an image of *ganbu qunzhong* all over the country unifying behind the decision to investigate Bo Xilai. In this sense, these party cadres were chosen to speak for the people.

When the trial started, “the people” also started to appear in the news as the crowd in the public gallery of the court. The public gallery was explicitly described as “orderly” in news reports, resonating with the above-mentioned description of the trial procedures, which also exhibited a clear and proper “order.” Individuals who listened to the court proceedings were quoted in some of the news articles. For instance, a PD report quoted a law school director in the public gallery who opined that “the trial process had very closely followed the proper legal procedures” (*People’s Daily*, August 27, 2013, p. 4), and the debates in the court were “adequate and comprehensive.” Although the source was a legal expert, his presence in the public gallery made him also a member of the listening public. His view served as confirmation of the quality of the trial by both an expert and a citizen.

The law school director’s opinion followed official rhetoric closely. He was even quoted for saying that information dissemination via Weibo “reflected the huge improvement in the country’s legal system.” In fact, in other cases, there was clear evidence that official discourses were simply “put into the mouths” of the quoted citizens. A PD article quoted a citizen in the public gallery who was an editor working at a publisher and said that “Bo Xilai was a high level leading party cadre, but everyone is equal before the law, I believe the people’s court will give a fair verdict” (*People’s Daily*, August 27, 2013, p. 4). The next day, another PD article quoted a local resident in Jinan, where the court trial took place, who claimed that it was the first time he went to the court to listen to a case. The article then quoted his view on the trial, which was a verbatim repetition of the quote by the editor the day before. Nonetheless, instead of simply criticizing the Chinese press for making up public opinion, the more important thing to note is that “the people” was evoked not to comment on the transgressions of Bo Xilai. The people in the public gallery did not gather to condemn official corruption; they were there to witness the trial and provided their positive appraisal.

The Boundary of the Dominant Discourse

As pointed out earlier, when covering the Bo Xilai trial, *Southern Metropolitan Daily* had to toe the party line so closely that it often reprinted the articles by PD and Xinhua. The difference between the reports in PD and SMD was minimal. Nevertheless, once the trial ended, SMD regained a limited degree of freedom in commenting on the matter. It published two commentary articles on January 10 and 19, 2014, respectively. Within the corpus analyzed, these two articles represented the extent to which media discourses could deviate from the party line.

The first of the two articles was titled “The Core of the Life and Influence of the Rule of Law Is to Limit Power” (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, January 10, 2014). The Chinese word for the phrase “the rule of law” is *fazhi*, which can be understood as either the rule of law or the rule by law (Zheng, 1999). What makes the rule of law distinctive is its emphasis on the sovereignty of the law: The law governs all political actors instead of being a tool used by political actors to govern. Notably, proceduralism and transparency, the two concepts emphasized by the media when covering the Bo Xilai trial, are compatible with the rule

by law. The January 10 SMD commentary, in contrast, highlighted the placing of limits on the exercise of power. The article elaborated:

The treatment of corruption cases showed the determination of the highest level to fight corruption and creates opportunities for the society to reflect on how to constrain power. . . . Xi Jinping reiterated "the thinking and method of *fazhi*" . . . and treated it as a core component of the "modernization of the national governing system and governing capacity." To manage the relationship between maintaining stability and protecting rights, one must first reflect on the operation of constraints of power . . . realizing the change from "governing people" to "governing officials." (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, January 10, 2014, p. A2)

The second article, on January 19, went a step further to discuss "democracy":

In sum, the source and allocation of power needs to be put onto the agenda in order to truly enhance the governing capacity of the nation. In my opinion, the problem of the law in contemporary China, such as judiciary fairness, transparency of legislation, and whether the law could realize genuine public reason are not only problems of the law, but also problems of politics. In other words, to push forward *fazhi* in contemporary China, one cannot avoid the question of democracy. (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, January 19, 2014, p. AII16)

These commentary articles represent calls for further legal reform. The January 10 article also included an emphasis on the necessity of "external pressure and monitoring" in order to "encircle power into the cage." This can be read as an implicit call for a higher degree of press freedom. However, from the two articles, one can also discern the limits on how far the concept of *fazhi* can be radicalized. First, the authority of the central government and Xi Jinping remains unchallenged. Instead, Xi was cited as the authority calling for further legal reform. Second, and more importantly, both articles emphasized the notion of governing capacity. In other words, the main rationale for legal reform is not a just and fair system per se, but more effective and efficient governance. Together with the fundamental ambiguity in the term *fazhi*, the two articles ultimately did not deviate substantially from the rule by law. Instead, the January 19 article stated:

In today's China, the law is often seen as a technique of governing the society. If we treat *fazhi* as a variable in governing capacity, I feel that the state's ability to use the law to govern still needs to be improved. (*Southern Metropolis Daily*, January 19, 2014, p. AII16)

In this passage, the state remains the agent using the law as a tool to govern. On the whole, the two articles can be read as only calling for a more effective rule by law by the top leaders.

Concluding Discussion

This article analyzes a prominent corruption scandal in China and illustrates how political scandals can serve as events through which an authoritarian government advances its political and policy agenda. Specifically, legal reform can be considered a key element in contemporary China's strategy of responsive authoritarianism—that is, a modern, credible, and fair legal system can better ensure the realization of justice, prevent abuse of power, and thus better guarantee overall governmental responsiveness. The development of legal reform has been complicated and uneven. Hurst (2016) opined that "China's civil law system is a type of rule by law regime, while its criminal law system is neotraditional" (p. 466). Without delving into the details of the legal system in operation, suffice it to note that the authoritarian regime would generally prefer the concept of the rule by law instead of the rule of law. The trial of Bo Xilai thus became an occasion—and later a news icon (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995)—for articulating and promoting the state's preferred conception of *fazhi*. Scholars have long noted that political leaders in dictatorships can scandalize their opponents in internal power struggles (Neckel, 2005), and the Bo Xilai trial could indeed be read as an internal power struggle between two factions (Meng, 2016). But this article argues that the significance of the event went beyond the downfall of a prominent figure on one side.

This study also provides insights about the possible differences between political scandals in authoritarian countries and those in liberal democracies. Several points based on the analysis of the Bo Xilai case can be noted. First, the case of Bo did not begin with the bottom-up revelation of a transgression. There was no attempt of public defense by the implicated politician. The construction and negotiation of scandals in the public arena were short-circuited, and the scandal began with institutional redress. In other words, compared with some of the processual models developed based on scandals in liberal democracies, the phase structure of the Bo Xilai scandal is simplified and truncated. For instance, applying the phases of Kantola and Vesa's (2013) model, there is no "crisis in which the breach of social norms widens" (p. 296). In the context of Jimenez's (2004) six-stage conceptualization, the Bo Xilai scandal moved almost directly from the first stage (the revelation of the wrongdoing) to the fifth stage (prosecution or institutional redress).

Second, judging by the significance of the case, the state-controlled media provided only a small amount of coverage, and the commercial press often directly utilized materials from the official organs. This is the direct result of the government's attempt to tightly control the information disseminated to the public and the range of permitted discourses. The mediated scandal event was carefully staged and meticulously managed.

Third, "the people" also had a subdued role. The outburst and representation of strong public disapproval, often considered a key aspect of media scandals in liberal democracies (Burkhardt, 2006; Thompson, 2000), were not central to the scandal process in the Bo Xilai trial. In media portrayals, ordinary Chinese citizens were not the source of societal outrage, but were the approving citizenry scattered throughout the country and symbolized by the applauding audience in the court. This reminds one of Habermas's (1989) notion of representative publicness, where publicity is a matter of the public showcase of ruling power, and the people are positioned as onlookers feeling awe and granting approval.

Fourth, political scandals are usually treated as events through which the moral consensus or a complex moral order of a society is reproduced and/or reconfirmed (Jacobsson & Lofmarck, 2008; Kantola & Vesa, 2013). In a superficial sense, the downfall of Bo Xilai did reconfirm the idea of the necessity of moral purity of political leaders. However, it would be misleading to read the trial merely as reconfirming existing values or the existing system. Instead, China is undergoing various transformations and reforms. The official media needed to walk a thin line between treating the protagonists as an absolute minority and recognizing the existing problems and thus justifying the urgency of reform measures. The media discourses thus had to complete three tasks simultaneously: confirm an existing moral order understood in highly general terms, present the need to move toward an improved system that would better guarantee the protection of the moral order, and prevent undermining the credibility of the existing political order.

This discussion of the differences between the Bo Xilai scandal and scandals in liberal democracies should be qualified in two ways. First, highlighting their differences does not entail the absence of similarities. In one sense, the Bo Xilai case suggests that, in authoritarian countries, political leaders are expected to abide by certain moral and/or political norms, and the violation of these norms can lead to public disapproval (despite the general lack of institutional means for the public disapproval to matter). Although the analysis showed that public disapproval was not emphasized or portrayed by the media in the Bo Xilai case, media discourses explicitly stated that the trial was a response to public opinion—that is, public disapproval of corruption was presumed. These basic similarities allow us to see the Bo Xilai case as a scandal in the conceptual sense.

Second, it has already been noted that the Bo Xilai case may not be a typical scandal in contemporary China. The advance of responsive authoritarianism has led to scandals involving private business enterprises broken by investigative journalism and scandals emerging from digital media similar to the Russian case analyzed by Toepfl (2011). It is beyond the scope of the discussion here to suggest a typology of scandals in China. Suffice it to note that scandals in China (or authoritarian countries in general) can vary along the dimension of whether they pose challenges to the legitimacy of the state. There are reasons to believe that, when a scandal does not threaten to undermine the legitimacy of the state, the scandal process would be managed to a lesser extent, and its process and characteristics may be more similar to scandals in liberal democracies. This issue must be examined through future studies. The case of Bo Xilai, nonetheless, is illustrative of a type of scandal that occurs mainly, if not only, in authoritarian systems.

Last, two additional future research directions can be noted. This article only analyzes media discourses and does not provide evidence on citizen reactions. It is problematic to assume that the Chinese audience would simply accept the surface meanings of the media texts. However, Stockmann (2013) has shown that the more credible commercial newspapers can influence people's attitudes in ways preferred by the state. Recent studies about the impact of the Internet under networked authoritarianism have also illustrated the influence of the dominant political ideologies transmitted through social media platforms (Li, Lee, & Li, 2017). There are reasons to believe that the dominant ideologies propagated through the trial of Bo Xilai could have influenced public opinion. Moreover, even if the political discourses did not persuade people to believe in the state's sincerity in pushing forward legal reform, it could have

deprived people of the alternative information and resources for creating more critical readings of the trial. In any case, research is needed on the impact of scandals on people's trust in political leaders and the political system in China.

Meanwhile, the analysis mentions the Weibo broadcast of the Bo Xilai trial. One may wonder what roles digital and social media play in the scandal process in China. On the one hand, the Chinese government has established a sophisticated and powerful system of Internet control and surveillance (King et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2013). It has the capability to severely undermine ordinary people's online expressions on sensitive matters. When online expressions are suppressed, digital media may not play a significant role in the dynamics of a scandal. On the other hand, the government may strategically allow online expressions on public controversies when such expressions do not threaten to become contentious collective actions and/or are consistent with the initiatives of the state (Tsai, 2016). In other words, in contemporary China, without dismissing the potential of bottom-up opinion expression via digital means, the role played by digital and social media in scandals should also be understood in relation to how digital communication is often part of the state's strategic management of public discourses. In any case, the role of digital and social media in the dynamics of scandal in China is another important area for further study.

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