

The Chongqing model is dead, long live the Chongqing model

‘Heavy state investment coupled with ersatz Maoist political slogans’ typifies the global media’s misleading shorthand for the Chongqing model. With the downfall of Bo Xilai, some argue, his model would be wound up as well.

Singing red songs and striking at crime—*changhong dahei*—grafted onto the Chongqing pilot programs by Bo after his arrival in 2007, indeed greatly enlivened the latter Hu-Wen years. But they had little to do with the aims of the original program, in place well before his appointment, to address income and citizenship disparities. Successful as a pilot, though unlikely to be implemented as a model, the program belongs on the ‘reform’, not the ‘conservative’ side of the ledger.

The package was designed to bring into full play Chongqing’s potential as a sparkplug for development in the West and Southwest. These are the regions where much of China’s developing-world conditions are concentrated. It also addressed reducing rural-urban gaps in public goods provision. Above all, the pilot policies set out to deal with systemic problems, crises the Hu-Wen administration failed to address with resolution or creative boldness.

Although increased participation by the civil sector was notionally on the agenda in recent years, Hu and Wen could never muster the political will to pursue it. Without some elements of a self-regulating civil society, complete with NGOs and citizen participation, welfare policies founder under escalating expectations and the aging of the population. Bo Xilai provided the needed circuit breaker, but his campaign-style mobilisation of the grassroots was, in the end, a reversion to discredited tactics of the Mao era.

Given the continuing need to rationalise social policy, it is too early to ring the curtains on the Chongqing initiatives. The criminal tendencies of local authorities and systematic discrimination toward migrant workers are in no way secrets; rather they have been the targets of Party editorialising for many years. Other facets of the pilot programs—how, for example, Chongqing positioned itself to attract the skilled migrant labour

that traditionally headed to the southern and coastal regions—are still poorly understood.

Policy expert Luo Xiaopeng, normally no champion of populist solutions, finds several strong points in the Chongqing model. First it had, and still has, a rare talent at the helm—not Bo, but Huang Qifan, executive-vice mayor since 2001 and mayor from 2009. According to Luo, *Huang had been the heart and soul of Shanghai’s financial reform, not only familiar with the operation of capital, but eclectic, open-minded, and highly creative. Very clear as to the game of central and local interests, he also knew how to deal with international capital.*

The model moreover passes a fundamental test, namely Amartya Sen’s insistence that theory is idle unless it addresses the most salient social injustices—in this case, the plight of China’s rural migrant workers.

A similar point was made by prolific sociologist Sun Liping in the wake of Bo Xilai’s fall. He argues that the problems addressed by the model were far from imaginary. In dealing with them, it helped ‘stretch the political space,’ and stimulated the emergence of a local governance at odds with the standard China model. Bo Xilai’s ultimate motives aside, the model was ‘formed in deep social soil’, namely the growing polarisation between rich and poor. We must look, however, beyond the problems a model solves to its logic and its mechanisms. Fascism too, writes Sun, solved some pressing problems of its day.

What of the prospects of the Chongqing model under Bo’s replacement, new Party Secretary Zhang Dejiang? While meeting several political criteria, with an interesting background in North Korean relations—far more traditionally leftist than anything so far seen in Chongqing—he may be no more than a temporary stopgap. What is clear is that the Southwest needs vigour and innovation. If Zhang can blend these with order and justice, he will win a deserved place with the powers that be.

The Chongqing model passes a fundamental test . . . it addresses the most salient social injustices

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The Chongqing Model revisited

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Ever since He Weifang set foot in Chongqing, sniffed the air and declared that they were 'turning back the clock and replaying the Cultural Revolution', the chorus of liberals questioning Chongqing and its model of governance has been unceasing. The dispute over the model has, in essence, evolved into a struggle over the future direction of China. But what the liberals didn't expect was that under Bo Xilai, the governance seems to have won the approval of the city's residents. Allowing nearly three million peasants into the city and treating them as city residents, this struggle for popular sentiment is at the vanguard of social morality.

Despite this, the Chongqing government did not engage in a traditional campaign-style, broad-brush solution. Chongqing gave peasants a free choice as to whether to enter the city. On their arrival, Chongqing allowed them to retain their rural land and resources for a limited period. The losses and gains entailed by this choice lay squarely in the hands of the peasants from start to finish. Therefore, it is only natural that the Chongqing model has captured popular sentiment. Of course today, following its increasing social acceptance, exploring whether the model exists or how to express its essential content, would seem to be of little significance. Popular approval offers an index which is difficult for those in power to ignore.

It is not difficult to find why the model is successful. This project to win over popular sentiment, is not only consistent with central government's requirements, but it avoids of mistakes made by other local governments in their exploration of social equality and justice. The earliest reports of the accountability of officials and their concern with grass-root sentiments came from Suqian, Jiangsu. The first steps towards encouraging peasants into the city, exploring the integration of urban and rural areas and common prosperity, were taken in Jiaying, Zhejiang. Campaigns against crime and corruption and constructing a peaceful society are definitely not Chongqing patents. With so many similar examples, why then has Chongqing alone planted a flag, and evolved into

a 'model'? Of course, the notion of a 'Chongqing Model' is very much related to Bo Xilai and the patrons who stand behind him. It is the political appeal of the Chongqing Model and the ability to restore the resources of governance that ensures that its political decisions are carried out. The Chongqing Model draws on the experiences of different regions and combines measures aimed at building social fairness. At a deeper level, it is a manifestation of the central government's intent.

Looking back across human history, there has never been a genuine socialist society. The notion of absolute social fairness and justice simply reflects utopian aspirations. As long as people exist and participate in social activities, social strata will inevitably be produced. Social fairness and justice are relative concepts. Apart from preventing its citizens from suffering under the colonial rule of other countries, the existence of the state and its degree of civilisation is intimately related to the extent to which it provides for the welfare of its citizens. Only a state that cares for its citizens can obtain their heartfelt support. Of course, the degree of welfare that a state can provide is directly proportional to its strength. In countries undergoing rapid social transformation such as Iraq and Libya, despite having—to some extent—implemented democratic institutions, the limitations of religious consciousness, sectarian tribal identity and other factors have meant that they remain inextricably ensnared in civil strife. In a country that has been unable to guarantee the supremely important right to life, as far as the aspirations of its citizens are concerned, social fairness and justice are far less important than stability. Freedom and democracy must yield to bread. What ordinary people want is simple and tangible. That is to say, stability overrides all else. As Chinese people often say, 'better to be a dog in peaceful times than a human in times of chaos.' Of course, the library-dwelling elite find this difficult to understand. Their disregard for matters that are life and death to those beneath them is unchangeably set by their ambition.

The failure of the liberals is actually the common failing of Chinese literati. Intolerant to the bone,

their intellectual inertia is difficult to change. The ingrained prejudices of this group means that they would rather stick to their old habits than open their eyes and see the world as it is. On closer examination, these prejudices have a subtle connection with the Chinese literati's cultural-historical perspective. Over the last two centuries of Chinese decline and Western ascendancy, as China scrambled to 'learn from the West', belief in China's supremacy gradually gave way to faith in, or even fear of, the West. Their expression of 'whatever is Western is good, whatever is Chinese is backward' must be understood in this context. Their mentality of faith in and fear of the West makes liberals oblivious to the great vitality of modern China. Of course, blindly criticizing liberals for this is neither objective nor in line with historical trends. After all, the West dominated the world for two centuries, and the unbearable experience of the first thirty years of the Peoples' Republic compounded liberals' misgivings. It is therefore difficult for them to take a rational view of the Chongqing Model.

Of course, today's China has achieved a series of substantial results, but is still some distance from realizing a harmonious, socialist society. There remains a significant gap between Western and Chinese social welfare systems. In fact, this reflects the causal link between social welfare and national strength. The rise of the West brought about chaos in the global order; through their colonial rule and plunder of other country's resources, the Western powers completed their 'primitive accumulation'. Yet the glorious rise of the great powers can hardly conceal the accompanying darkness of genocide and slavery. When New China was established, the shape of the international order was already set, so China's own primitive accumulation could only be completed through the exploitation of its citizens and in particular the exploitation of the peasantry. The double exploitation of the peasantry - the 'scissors gap' between prices of industrial and agricultural products and the process of urbanization - and the household registration system that underpins the social order, are clear proof of this. As such, the urban-rural divide is a subject that is difficult for leftists or those in power to avoid. Indeed, it confirms liberals' denunciation of China's lack of fairness and justice. In light of all this, the success of the Chongqing Model in China's period of transition provides a completely new mode of think-

ing about eliminating social injustice.

Source:

Sunwenhao123, 'Zai lun "Chongqing moshi"' [Once again on the 'Chongqing model'], Wu you zhi xiang, 9 February 2012

Sunwenhao123: '再论 "重庆模式"', 乌有之乡, 2012年2月9日

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