

So Crooked They Have to Screw Their Pants On Part 3: The Guo Boxiong Edition

James Mulvenon

On 30 July, the Central Committee announced that General Guo Boxiong, who served as vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission between 2002 and 2012, was expelled from the Chinese Communist Party and handed over to prosecutors for accepting bribes “on his own and through his family . . . for aiding in the promotion [of officers].” Guo’s expulsion comes one year after similar charges against his fellow CMC vice-chair Xu Caihou, who died of bladder cancer in March 2015. This article examines the charges against Guo, places them in the context of the larger anti-corruption campaign within the PLA, and assesses their implications for Xi Jinping’s relationship with the military and for party-army relations.

The Rise and Fall of Guo Boxiong

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Who is Guo Boxiong? Born to a rural family in Liquan County, Shaanxi, in 1942, Guo worked in a military-owned factory for three years before joining the PLA in 1961. His early career was spent in the 55th Division of the 19th Army in the Lanzhou Military Region. Guo rose to command the 47th Army Corps in Gansu Province. Later he moved to the Center as deputy commander of the Beijing Military Region and then commander of the Lanzhou Military Region, which was reputed to be his power base. Guo was appointed vice-chairman of the CMC in 2004, serving two five-year terms before retiring in November 2012.³ He was last seen in public on 11 April 2013, when he visited Shaolin Temple in Henan Province.⁴ He was last mentioned in the state media on 16 February, when the central leadership had visited “retired comrades” ahead of the Spring Festival to deliver New Year wishes.⁵

For PLA watchers, the announcement of Guo’s expulsion and prosecution was not really a surprise. Indeed, the last year or so has witnessed a steady drumbeat of detentions and investigations of Guo’s family and close professional associates, leading to rampant speculation that the authorities were closing in on Guo himself. In January 2015, the PLA announced it was probing 16 high-ranking officials for links to corruption, including Fang Changmi, the former deputy political commissar of the Lanzhou Military Region,

which was Guo's historic power base.⁶ A subsequent inquiry into the former head of the logistics department for the Beijing Military Region, Dong Mingxiang, revealed payments to senior officials, including Guo, to get promoted.⁷ In February, Guo's son, Guo Zhenggang, a deputy political commissar of the Zhejiang Military District, was placed under investigation for "serious legal violations and criminal offenses."⁸ Guo Zhenggang's wife, Wu Fangfang, a businesswoman based in Hangzhou, was also investigated for fraud.⁹ In March, Guo's brother, Guo Boquan, head of the Department of Civil Affairs of Shaanxi province and a former official in the city of Weinan, was detained on corruption charges.¹⁰ Guo Boquan reportedly misappropriated more than 89 million yuan in funds originally allocated for a disaster recovery center, which he then used to build cheap apartments to sell to staff and public servants in other departments.¹¹ Guo Boxiong himself was finally informed of an investigation into his own malfeasance on the morning of 9 April.¹²

The CMC Discipline Inspection Commission investigation of Guo Boxiong occurred almost entirely behind the veil of internal party secrecy. Finally, on 30 July the Central Committee was briefed on the findings of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, which were summarized in a document entitled "Report on the Organization of Investigation on the Situation and Handling Opinions on Guo Boxiong."¹³ After hearing the results of the investigation, the Central Committee decided to expel Guo and hand him over to the Supreme People's Procuratorate. An authoritative commentary in *Liberation Army Daily* laid out the details of the indictment:

Guo Boxiong used the convenience of his job to seek promotions and other benefits for other people, received bribes directly or through his family members, seriously violated party discipline, was suspected of committing the crime of bribe-taking. His behavior completely went against the character and the cardinal principle of the party and the PLA, seriously harmed the image of the party and the People's Army, caused extremely evil social influence.¹⁴

After the Central Committee's announcement, the party and military propaganda apparatus kicked into gear to disseminate the decision and guide the accompanying political work. Xinhua faithfully reported that the soldiers and officers of the PLA and the People's Armed Police supported the party's decision to prosecute Guo and promised to study his case.¹⁵ A separate Xinhua article declared that the decision "showcased the CPC's resolve and 'zero tolerance' in fighting corruption, and will surely be supported by the entire Party, army and the public."¹⁶ Propaganda supremo Liu Yunshan emerged from the leadership bunker to promote the policy of the "three stricts and three earnest," which refers to being strict in morals, power, and discipline, and honest in decisions, business, and behavior.¹⁷ A series of authoritative commentaries in both *People's Daily* and *Liberation Army Daily* serve as a clarion warning to Guo and Xu's colleagues that "business as usual" with respect to corruption is no longer acceptable.¹⁸ Finally, the official Army Day editorial in *Liberation Army Daily* on 1 August declared:

We need to consolidate and deepen the results of the party's mass line

education and practice activities, solidly carry out the thematic education and rectification on the “three stricts and three substantives,” completely eradicate the impact of the cases of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, steadfastly crack down on corruption, and resolutely rectify the unhealthy practices at the grassroots and around officers and men.¹⁹

At the same time, the editorial was careful to bookend the bad news from the Guo case with an introductory lauding of the PLA’s achievements over the previous year and the expected highlights in the coming months, especially the military’s grand parade in Beijing on 3 September to mark the end of World War Two. Overall, the traditional “state of the PLA” summary did not strike a crisis tone, but instead sought to contextualize Guo’s prosecution within the larger background of the PLA’s modernization successes.

Conclusion and Implications

Former General Guo Boxiong is the highest-ranking PLA leader thus far to be expelled from the CCP and remanded for prosecution in Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. While Xu Caihou also served as a vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, Guo was the senior CMC official for military affairs and Xu was always listed behind Guo in protocol order. Xi’s willingness to go after such a top-level “tiger” re-emphasizes the deadly seriousness of the current purge within the PLA, and makes it painfully clear to current active-duty personnel that rank and patronage are no protection from the discipline inspection teams. It is also clear that the expulsion and prosecution of Guo Boxiong does not represent the culmination of the anti-corruption campaign within the PLA. As one *Liberation Army Daily* commentary asserts,

the situation still remains grim and complex. For instance, there are still large loads of problems that need to be settled, there are considerable number of people who have been polluted by the “haze” over some period, there are some people who continue walking along old path even after the 18th CPC National Congress, sometimes the efforts to deter unhealthy tendencies meet with resistance, there is still a long way to go to rebuild an excellent political ecology, and we still have not scored a crushing victory in the realization of the people who dare not become corrupt, who are unable to become corrupt, and who do not want to become corrupt.²⁰

Given the fact that many if not all of the PLA’s lower-ranking general-grade and flag officers on active duty were likely obliged to pay bribes to Guo or Xu or both as they moved up the ranks, and are no doubt complicit in their own upward bribe-giving and downward bribe-receiving with subordinate personnel, they would be well advised to continue to divest their illicit real estate, luxury cars, and mistresses.

Notes

¹ The official announcement can be found on the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection website: http://www.ccdi.gov.cn/xwtt/201507/t20150730_59984.html.

² “China Expels Former Military Leader From Communist Party Over Bribes,” *Kyoto World Service*, 30 July 2015.

³ Wang Heyan, “General Who Led PLA Said to Be Expelled from Party,” *Caixin Online*, 2 August 2015, accessed at <http://english.caixin.com/2015-07-31/100835169.html>.

⁴ “CPC Expels Former General,” *Global Times Online*, 31 July 2015, accessed at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/934787.shtml>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “General Who Led PLA Said to Be Expelled from Party.”

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “CPC Expels Former General.” According to *Global Times*, Wu married Guo in December 2012, about a year after she ended her 21-year first marriage. Wu reportedly owned an unfinished building that was supposed to house a hardware market on military-owned land in Hangzhou. During construction, Wu’s company began to sell commercial space in the mall, collecting more than 500 million yuan (\$80 million) from some 2,000 investors and would-be tenants. The 300,000-square-meter mall was due to be completed in 2011, but was never finished.

¹⁰ “郭伯雄胞弟郭伯权被调查 恐凶多吉少[图],” *Duowei News*, 3 March 2015.

¹¹ “Retired Chinese General Guo Boxiong Expelled From Communist Party For Alleged Corruption,” *South China Morning Post*, 30 July 2015, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1845230/retired-chinese-general-guo-boxiong-expelled-communist>.

¹² “General Who Led PLA Said to Be Expelled from Party.”

¹³ “CPC Central Committee Decides to Expel Guo Boxiong from the Party and Transfer the Issue and Clues of Guo Boxiong Being Suspected of Committing Crimes to Judicial Organs for Handling According to Law,” *Xinhua*, 30 July 2015.

¹⁴ Staff commentator, “Resolutely Support the Correct Decision of the Party Central Leadership,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 31 July 2015, p. 1.

¹⁵ “PLA Backs Probe of Corrupt Military Leader,” *Xinhua*, 1 August 2015.

¹⁶ “Graft Probe Into Guo Boxiong to Win Army, Public’s Support,” *Xinhua*, 30 July 2015.

¹⁷ “Senior Chinese Leader Urges Officials to Learn From Corrupt Cases,” *Xinhua*, 31 July 2015.

¹⁸ Staff commentator, “Resolutely Support the Correct Decision of the Party Central Leadership,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 31 July 2015, p.1; staff commentator, “Iron-Fisted Anti-Corruption Drive Helps Pool Hearts and Minds in the Party and Among the People,” *People’s Daily*, 31 July 2015, p.1; staff commentator, “Earnestly Strengthen Education, Management, and Supervision of Leading Cadres,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 1 August 2015, p. 2; commentator: “Forge an Iron and Steel Great Wall Through Strict Management of the Army,” *People’s Daily*, 1 August 2015, p.1; and staff commentator, “Resolutely score victory in enduring anti-corruption struggle that is like storming a fortress,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 2 August 2015, p. 1.

¹⁹ Editorial, “Take On the Historic Responsibility of Strengthening the Military and Rejuvenating the Military—Warmly Celebrating the 88th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Liberation Army,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 1 August 2015, pp. 1, 3.

²⁰ “Resolutely score victory in enduring anti-corruption struggle is like storming a fortress.”