

“Scraping Poison Off the Bone” (刮骨疗毒): An Examination of the Campaign to “Eliminate the Baneful Influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou”

James Mulvenon

In July 2016, Chinese state media began using a new formulation about “eliminating the baneful [pernicious] influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou” from the military. As discussed in previous issues of the *China Leadership Monitor*, Guo and Xu are the highest-ranking Chinese military officers indicted in Xi Jinping’s ongoing anti-corruption purge. This article examines the origins and course of this new campaign, and assesses its implications for party-military relations.

In July 2016, Chinese state media began using a new *tifa* (提法, formulation) about “eliminating the baneful [pernicious] influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou” from the military. As discussed in previous issues of the *Monitor*, former Central Military Vice-Chairmen Guo and Xu are the highest-ranking Chinese military officers indicted in Xi Jinping’s ongoing anti-corruption purge. Xu Caihou escaped the hangman’s noose by dying of bladder cancer in March 2015.¹ Guo Boxiong, who retired in 2012, was expelled from the party in 2015, but observers wondered whether he would ever be formally tried for his crimes.²

On 25 July 2016, state media announced that Guo Boxiong, 74, had been convicted in a secret trial for accepting bribes, and was sentenced to life in prison.³ According to the verdict, Guo “had taken advantage of his position to assist the promotion and reassignment of others, and had accepted huge amounts in bribes both personally and in collusion with others.”⁴ *China Daily* asserted that the trial (Star Chamber?) was conducted behind closed doors because it “touched on military secrets.”⁵ A reputable Hong Kong newspaper reported that the amount of the bribes in question totaled RMB80 million, or roughly \$12 million.⁶ By the standards of discipline apparatus, these bribes were judged to be “extremely huge” and his crimes were “extremely serious.”⁷ As befitting his party training, Guo readily “confessed to his misdeeds and repented in good faith,” though he was stripped of his political rights for life and stripped of his rank of general. His personal assets were seized, and all his illicit gains were confiscated and turned over to the State treasury.⁸ An accompanying *People’s Daily* commentary summarized the lessons of the process, asserting that Guo was “handled in accordance with the law,” the verdict had “demonstrated the resolute stance of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the administering of the party with strict discipline and the administering of the military with strict discipline,” and the party would continue “using strong doses of medicine to cure diseases and scraping the poison off the bone” (刮骨疗毒) and “eradicate evils.”⁹ The commentary concluded with a warning: “The military is an armed force and there must be absolutely no hideouts for the corrupt elements.”

The Campaign

One week prior to Guo Boxiong's conviction, then vice-chairman of the CMC Fan Changlong on 19 July 2016 warned the new Southern Theater Command about eliminating the "baneful influence" of Xu and Guo.¹⁰ While the timing of Fan's comments strongly suggests that the results of Guo's trial might have been "fixed" (shocking), it was an important indicator that the party and the military and their corresponding propaganda apparatuses were ready to turn a corner and begin to systematically use Xu and Guo as classic "negative examples" for the rest of the armed forces. When asked after the verdict whether there is a "Guo Boxiong faction or clique" in the PLA, however, the Defense Ministry spokesman sternly dodged the question.¹¹

Throughout the remainder of July, the campaign was publicly conducted through a series of commentaries in *Liberation Army Daily*. A 27 July article entitled "Further clarify thinking through a thorough ideological overhaul,"¹² declared: "to eradicate an evil, it is necessary to look at the root cause of the evil; to cure a disease, it is necessary to look at the root cause of the disease." Continuing the medical theme, a 29 July 2016 article exhorted the rank and file with the title "We cannot have one iota less calcium for spirit."¹³ A 30 July 2016 article entitled "Break new ground for getting stronger, take on the important task of military strengthening"¹⁴ made the linkage between eliminating the Guo/Xu influence and the success of the ongoing military reforms. Finally, a 2 August 2016 article focused on the individual, asking "What is the strategic point for forging absolutely loyal political character?"¹⁵

By late August, the organizational apparatus was in full swing, manifested in a high-level meeting of the "All-Army Leading Small Group to Implement the Political Work Spirit of Gutian,"¹⁶ drawing on the ideological lessons discussed in my *China Leadership Monitor* no. 46 essay.¹⁷ Further preparation occurred at a 27 September 2016 All-Army Political and Legal Work conference attended by CMC Vice-Chair Xu Qiliang, who specifically mentioned the *tifa* about eradicating the influence of Guo and Xu.¹⁸

This series of meetings culminated in a 10 October 2016 meeting for "Major Units and CMC Departments," headlined by both Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang.¹⁹ The main themes of the meeting were summarized in a high-profile 11 October commentary in *Liberation Army Daily*, somewhat verbosely entitled, "To comprehensively and thoroughly eradicate the harmful influence of the corruption cases of former Central Military Commission Vice Chairmen Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, the PLA forces of all levels should resolutely rid themselves of long-standing and widely accepted practices that violate the PLA rule."²⁰ Staying true to the PLA's peasant roots, the article employed an agricultural metaphor: "we should weed out evils in the way a farmer does to grass in fields. To weed out evils, we must be firm and root them out so that they will not return." While excoriating Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou as "the highest-ranking leading cadres of our army since its founding to have been investigated and handled for violation of laws and discipline," the commentary called for "a purge of deep-seated problems in ideology, politics, organization, and work style" and hinted that the campaign should be expanded to include mid-ranking officers. One Hong Kong newspaper added that the CMC reportedly ordered the destruction of "all military books containing Guo and Xu's

speeches, words or pictures.”²¹ Interestingly, the hawkish *Global Times* reported on 16 October that a group of disgruntled PLA veterans sought to capitalize on the campaign by leading a protest in Beijing outside the meeting building, complaining that during the decade of Guo and Xu’s command their concerns were ignored.²²

A week later, the CCP unveiled a slick anti-corruption documentary entitled *Always on the Road* (永远在路上).²³ The official English translation, “The Corruption Fight Is Always Underway,” provides more obvious context. Showing greater discipline and parsimony than the usual CCTV-1 serial with dozens or hundreds of episodes, this eight-part film, co-produced with the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), featured over a dozen indicted officials.²⁴ State media promised “tearful confessions and juicy details,”²⁵ and described the purpose of the show as a “cautionary tale.” The Zhou Yongkang, Guo Boxiong, and Xu Caihou cases were discussed, including the use of rare still photos of both Guo and Xu, but neither man was interviewed.

The Guo-Xu campaign naturally appeared in the propaganda surrounding the Sixth Plenary session of the 18th Party Congress in late October.²⁶ The CMC Standing Committee held a meeting on 3 November devoted to studying the spirit of the Sixth Plenum, and one of the major themes was to “comprehensively and thoroughly eliminate the bad influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou.”²⁷ An 8 November article elaborated on the campaign’s main thrusts, asserting that the arrest and conviction of both men, who by their actions had “poisoned the red gene,” had “eliminated the major hidden political danger for the party and the armed forces.”²⁸ Yet the article was also more circumspect, claiming that “the broad ranks of officers and men more and more intensely sensed that had we not comprehensively and thoroughly eliminated the baneful influence exerted by Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, the unwritten rules that they set will be concealed, and their set of style and histrionics will continue, and this will affect the deepening and smooth implementation of reforms and affect the process of the strengthening and development of the armed forces.” As a result, the rank and file needed to redouble their efforts to “thoroughly clean up the effects of baneful influence in work guidance, format of thinking, habitual practice, repertoire pattern, style and histrionics.” To wit, “party committees and organs at the regiment or above level in the whole army worked around major issues of right or wrong, such as using authority for official affairs and exploiting power, pursuing actual accomplishments, chasing after fame and fortune, criterion of combat power and other assessment standards, enforcement of the rule of law, and the habit of the rule by people; extensively carried out discussions and discrimination; educated and guided party members-cum-cadres to deeply dig into the roots of ideological ailment; and cleaned up the ideological dense fog.” Complete success appears to be elusive, however, as 2016 ended with yet more questions, aptly summarized in the title of a 22 December commentary in *Liberation Army Daily*: “What does true loyalty mean?”²⁹

Conclusion and Implications

Viewed in its entirety, we are left with a campaign whose goal is to eradicate the type of behavior and thinking and mindset associated with Guo and Xu, but is not aimed at a Cultural Revolution–style witchhunt to find quotas of unindicted co-conspirators of the

two disgraced officials. This is strange on many levels, not the least of which is that the specific crimes *required* such co-conspirators, as Xu and Guo were certainly not bribing themselves or solely each other. Instead, the leadership was likely putting down a marker that could be used retroactively to summarize the crimes of future victims of the anti-corruption campaign. Indeed, over the time period of the campaign, there was a steady drumbeat of public arrests, including Wang Jianping (deputy chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department),³⁰ Tian Xiushi (former PLA Air Force political commissar), Zhang Ming (deputy chief of staff, Jinan MR),³¹ MG Liao Xijun (younger brother of Liao Xilong),³² MG Zhu Xinjian (secretary to Li Jinai),³³ and then finally Li Jinai and Liao Xilong themselves.³⁴ It is expected that more arrests will continue in 2017.

Notes

¹ Li Rongde, “Senior Party Officials Indicted For Corruption Appear In New TV Show,” *Caixin wang*, 18 October 2016, accessed at: <http://english.caixin.cn/2016-10-18/100998220.html>.

² “Ex-military leader Guo given life in bribery case,” *China Daily Online*, 25 July 2016, accessed at: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-07/26/content_26219276.htm.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jun Mai and Minnie Chan, “Former top PLA general Guo Boxiong jailed for life over graft,” *South China Morning Post*, 25 July 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1994588/former-top-pla-general-guo-boxiong-jailed-life-over>.

⁷ “Ex-Military Leader Guo Given Life In Bribery Case.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Staff Commentator, “We must fight against corruption and crack down on law violation,” *People’s Daily*, 26 July 2016, p. 1.

¹⁰ “Fan Changlong Conducts Investigation and Study of Units in Southern Theater Command: Constantly Deepen and Refine Preparations Sea Direction Military Struggles,” China News Service, 19 July 2016.

¹¹ “Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference on July 28,” *China Military Online*, 28 July 2016.

¹² Staff Commentator, accessed at: http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-07/27/content_7175377.htm.

¹³ Staff Commentator, *Liberation Army Daily*, accessed at: http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-07/29/content_7179557.htm.

¹⁴ Staff Commentator, p. 2.

¹⁵ Wei Guofeng, “What is the strategic point for forging absolutely loyal political character?” *Liberation Army Daily*, accessed at: http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2016-08/02/content_7185507.htm.

¹⁶ Yin Hang and Huang Chao, “The PLA Work Leading Group tasked to organize and guide the PLA Forces across the country to implement and carry out the spirit of the PLA Political Work Conference held in Gutian Town, Fujian Province, two years ago, calls a

membership meeting,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 27 August 2016, accessed at: http://www.81.cn/jwzb/2016-08/27/content_7227801.htm.

¹⁷ See James Mulvenon, “Hotel Gutian: We Haven’t Had That Spirit Here Since 1929,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46, 19 March 2015, accessed at: <http://www.hoover.org/research/hotel-gutian-we-havent-had-spirit-here-1929>.

¹⁸ Xinhua, 27 September 2016.

¹⁹ Mei Changwei, “Party Secretary thematic meeting for all major military units, Central Military Commission organs and departments convenes in Beijing, Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang attend and speak,” Xinhua, 10 October 2016.

²⁰ Staff Commentator, accessed at: http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-10/11/content_7294646.htm.

²¹ Minnie Chan, “Chinese military’s anti-graft drive targets mid-level officers to root out disgraced leaders’ influence,” *South China Morning Post*, 11 October 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2026986/chinese-militarys-anti-graft-drive-targets-mid-level>.

²² “Veterans sent home with high officials’ promises after protests in Beijing,” *Global Times*, 16 October 2016, accessed at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1011657.shtml>.

²³ Zhang Yan, “Public gets look at heart of graft,” *China Daily Online*, 18 October 2016, accessed at: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/19/content_27102369.htm. See also Li Haoran, “It is necessary to always maintain the intrinsic political quality of being immune from corruption,” *People’s Daily*, 19 October 2016, p. 5.

²⁴ “Senior Party Officials Indicted For Corruption Appear in New TV Show” (see endnote 1).

²⁵ “Public gets look at heart of graft.”

²⁶ “All Army and Armed Police units rapidly whip up upsurge on study and implementation of Sixth Plenary Session of 18th CPC Central Committee, broad ranks of officers and men express one after another that they will unswervingly advance efforts to comprehensively administer party with strict discipline, and unremittingly struggle for construction of world first-class armed forces,” Xinhua, 30 October 2016.

²⁷ Wang Yushan, “The Central Military Commission holds its executive meeting to study and implement the spirit of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee,” Xinhua, 3 November 2016.

²⁸ “Writing epochal chapter on political army building—Looking back at Gutian All-Army Political Work Conference on second anniversary of its convening (Part two of three),” Xinhua, 8 November 2016.

²⁹ Staff Commentator, accessed at: http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-12/22/content_7418445.htm.

³⁰ Zhang Zhihao, “Defense Ministry confirms general under investigation,” *China Daily Online*, 29 December 2016, accessed at: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-12/29/content_27816178.htm.

³¹ Choi Chi-Yuk, “Crackdown On PLA corruption targets former regional commander,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 September 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2011910/crackdown-pla-corruption-targets-former-regional>.

³² Minnie Chan and Choi Chi-Yuk, “PLA general held after 37m yuan seized, but takedown hints at revenge plot against prominent brother,” *South China Morning Post*, 28 May 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1956865/pla-general-held-after-37m-yuan-seized-takedown-hints>.

³³ Minnie Chan and Choi Chi-Yuk, “Two more of China’s former top commanders taken away for corruption investigation: military sources,” *South China Morning Post*, 5 August 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1999535/two-more-chinas-former-top-commanders-taken-away>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*