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INTRIGUE: MURDER IN THE LUCKY HOLIDAY HOTEL – a Greek tragedy in China

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Abstract

Following the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Xi Jinping has rendered himself the omnipotent ruler of one fifth of the world's population. Xi has defeated his political rivals with no mercy; among them was a rising political star, Bo Xilai, who was shot down in 2012 and is now in prison. Bo has been nearly forgotten – until early this year when his dramatic life and political battle were revived by Carrie Gracie with her brilliant BBC podcast series, *Intrigue: Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel*.

Although as a Chinese native I followed fairly closely the toppling of Bo, this series has provided me with many unheard materials. As a Google Policy Fellow studying news censorship, I happened to witness how Chinese media were controlled in the thick of Bo's drama. For NetEase alone, a top news portal in China, about 50 articles were censored during the week when police chief Wang Lijun, once Bo's right arm, ran to the US consulate for asylum. Gracie thrillingly portrays a tragedy "with no heroes but only villains and victims". They include: Bo, the fallen politician; Gu, his wife; Guagua, their son; Wang; and Neil Heywood, a British expat in China whose life was mythically entangled with elites across nations and whose death has forever changed Chinese history.

Keywords

podcasting, audio storytelling, Bo Xilai, Xi Jinping, China

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Podcast series by BBC World Service

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[Audio: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04sj2pt/episodes/downloads](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04sj2pt/episodes/downloads)

Reviewed by Sonya Song

Through the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping has secured all the powers the nation has to offer and rendered himself the omnipotent ruler of one fifth of the world's population. Xi has defeated his political rivals with no mercy; among them was a rising political star, Bo Xilai, who was shot down in 2012, the eve of the 18th Party Congress.

Leading his life behind bars in parallel with Xi's presidency, Bo has been nearly forgotten – until early this year when his dramatic life and political battle were revived by Carrie Gracie with her brilliant BBC podcast series, *Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel*.

Gracie portrays a tragedy “with no heroes but only villains and victims”. They include: Bo, the fallen politician; Gu, his wife; Guagua, their son; Wang, Bo's once ally; and Neil Heywood, a British expat in China whose life was mythically entangled with elites across nations and whose death has forever changed Chinese history.

Bo's experience is worth being told and learned because, among other reasons, it serves the two basic roles of journalism: to provide information and story. This categorization is seen as mutually exclusive by some people. While information is often seen as factual and impartial, serving an audience focused on a stable life and a rational mind, story is judged as specious and sensational, catering to another crowd with an unstable life and a disquieted mind. However, the truth is that the practice of journalism can embrace both roles and satisfy various audiences at once, as shown in Gracie's production.

To inform

With thrilling music, Gracie introduces the series as a revelation of sex and violence, which easily puts itself into the “story” category. Immediately, she promises she will tell “how China really works in a way that day-to-day headlines don't” and show “the dark heart of Chinese elite politics”, which also qualifies itself as “information” journalism. Gracie isn't disappointing for a second as she interweaves information with enjoyable aesthetics in her storytelling.

One concern with colourful storytelling is that it can easily cloud and manipulate people's minds by muffling rationality and stirring up emotion. Such danger, however, is mostly rooted in false information rather than the narrative, because, although storytelling does affect perception, the authenticity of journalism comes from scrupulous work of interviews and other information gathering and verification techniques. In this series, Gracie has successfully cited a number of insiders, including Bo's former teacher and classmate, Gu's former colleague and Heywood's friend. In addition, she has included her failures to reach others, such as the UK government, the Chinese prison, the Lucky Holiday Hotel and millions of residents in Chongqing.

Although as a Chinese native I followed fairly closely the toppling of Bo in 2012-13, this series has provided me many unheard materials from the interviewees, as I'm not an insider of Chinese politics myself and Chinese media are obliged to endorse the winner of the political game rather than illustrate how the game was played. When condemning political underdogs and dissidents, Chinese media always take a serious tone despite questionable logic. But to me and other curious minds, the poker face on CCTV does not make the claims more convincing, and this personal experience has also disbanded the link between journalistic authenticity and dispassionate narrative.

The [text version](#) of this case, which was published after the podcast series and mostly based on the scripts, reads fairly soberly with Gracie's colourful narrative and the catchy soundtrack stripped off. Based on the same information, the dual presentations appear so distinct that they inevitably engender differing appraisals of authenticity and aesthetics.

To entertain

Gracie's story came five years after Bo's fall. And five years mark watersheds of Chinese politicians' lives, when the Party Congress comes back and leadership changes hands in a muffled, curtained war room. Five years before Bo's eventual overthrow, the battle among the Chinese princelings was already fierce, when Bo was marginalized by his numerous enemies in Beijing and posted to the far west, to Chongqing. But it was Bo himself who made Chongqing his Waterloo with his own fatal flaws and mistakes.

In this sense, Bo has turned himself into a protagonist like those in a classical Greek tragedy. Bo's relentless thirst for power did not allow him to stay defeated and silenced in Chongqing. Instead he ventured to win the spotlight by exploiting populism from afar. To illustrate Bo's ambition to deify himself, Gracie smartly picked a paean that chants Bo's name. The tremendous power and popularity Bo wielded facilitated his assault on police chief Wang Lijun, once his right arm, whose consequent betrayal left Bo completely exposed to his political rivals.

Playwrights would not dare write such a dramatic story, being concerned that it may sound too distant from reality, but it is precisely the drama in this story that immensely entertains our ears.



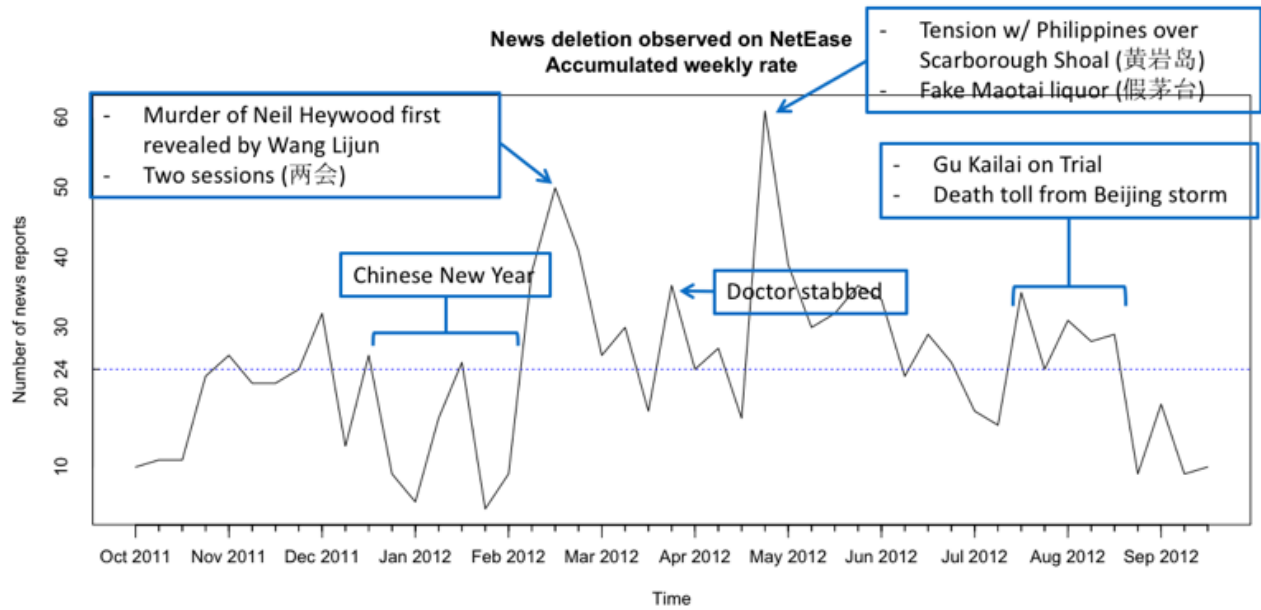
Bo Xilai and his wife, Gu, at the funeral of Bo's father. (photo: BBC)

To interpret

Not only informative and entertaining, Gracie has also interpreted how a distinct Chinese polity functions, or in fact malfunctions, and laid bare to Western audiences the absence of privileges they enjoy and probably take for granted, such as freedom of press and expression, judicial independence and universal suffrage. Curious minds may further find themselves intrigued by numerous questions beyond the stereotypical China in everyday headlines: Is the Chinese model a new ideal due to its efficiency, as seen in the past decades? Is this “efficient” governance sustainable given the widespread corruption? Is popularity a valid measure of a politician?

In fact, this series has a lot to offer to a Chinese audience as well, because it has revealed many backstage stories that Chinese media had never and will never do under the current administration. As a Google Policy Fellow studying news censorship, I happened to witness how Chinese media were controlled in the thick of Bo's drama. For NetEase alone, a top news portal in

China, about 50 articles were censored during the week when Wang ran to the US consulate for asylum. Another 30 articles were deleted when Gu was on trial, while on average 24 stories were censored from NetEase in 2012 (see Chart 1).



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Chart 1

Politics is perplexing indeed and it is more so in China where the perpetrators and witnesses are “either dead, in jail or unwilling to talk” and the outsiders are left with merely “one truth replaced by another”. Despite all the difficulties, Gracie has brought back a well researched and well produced political drama to inform, entertain and interpret for Western and Chinese audiences. Isn’t this the best thing a journalist can offer to her audience?

5 SONYA SONG

Sonya Song is a multi-awarded scholar studying a wide variety of media-related subjects, including media economics, distributed content and media control.

Sonya started her career as a journalist in Beijing after studying computer science at Tsinghua University. She obtained her Ph.D. from Michigan State University with concentration on media economics, a field that answers the question, how to make money using media content. Her interdisciplinary trainings have enabled her to study media phenomena using both qualitative and quantitative research methods and her cross-culture work experiences have inspired her to examine both ends of the media effects spectrum: How to spur people into action and how to rein them in.

Sonya is currently working at Chartbeat where she focuses on user behaviors and business models and offers insights to a variety of publishers around the world. Prior to Chartbeat, she was a 2014 Harvard Berkman Fellow, a 2013 Knight-Mozilla OpenNews Fellow and a 2012 Google Policy Fellow. @sonya2song, sonya2song@gmail.com



