

Sordid Side of China's Party

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After a year of unexplained delay, the trial of Bo Xilai, the former Communist Party secretary of Chongqing municipality, is finally about to begin. Bo faces three charges: corruption, bribery and abuse of power. But his real offense is that he challenged the Chinese Communist Party's way of doing things. Moreover, his wife's conviction of the widely publicized murder of British businessman Neil Heywood has severely embarrassed the Communist Party.

When the court finally convicts Bo — and he is certain to be convicted — he will probably face a prison term similar to that of former Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu, who received 18 years in prison, or former Beijing Party Secretary Chen Xitong, who was sentenced to 16 years. Like Bo, both men had been members of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, its inner circle. This membership allowed them to escape a death sentence, unlike the lower-ranking former Railways Minister Liu Zhijun following his conviction on similar charges of corruption and abuse of power.

For the Communist Party, however, Bo's conviction will not mark the end of the scandal. Nor will the shadow cast over the country's leadership by his high-living, exiled son Bo Guagua

and his homicidal wife Bogu Kailai simply disappear. But the fall of Bo and his family hardly rises to the level of Shakespearean tragedy. "King Lear" this is not.

Of course, Bo and his wife and son have been morally dead for some time. Power sapped their humanity. Bogu killed Heywood, her lover and business partner, and many other innocent people died as a result of Bo's ambition. His thuggish chief henchman, the former Chongqing police chief Wang Lijun, fled to the U.S. consulate in Chengdu, fearing that his life was in jeopardy because he knew too much about Heywood's murder and Bo's other crimes.

Still, the Communist Party wants nothing more than to whitewash the scandal. The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection has already scrapped charges of illicit sexual relations involving several women, signaling that such crimes are to remain hidden when Central Committee members commit them. This follows a similar official response to Chen Liangyu's philandering and to Chen Xitong's "Five Golden Flowers."

Furthermore, charges that Bo received 20 million yuan (\$3.2 million) in bribes and misappropriated 5 million yuan are trivial compared to those leveled against Liu Zhijun. Thus, with his level of bribery deemed small and his wife artfully scapegoated, the only high crime of which Bo stands accused is dereliction of duty. By limiting the charges, the Communist Party has limited the possible punishments.

As always where the party's leadership is concerned, Chinese law is mere window dressing. The law is applied sparingly, if at all, to the elite, and the interests of justice — at least as the outside world understands the term — are rarely the highest priority in such situations. A trial such as Bo's is invariably part of a political deal among insiders.

The real story of Bo's career — one of infidelity, betrayal and corruption — is appalling. The victims include the Heywood family, his Chinese wife and their children. Their tragedy stands as a profound indictment of the Communist Party's rule because no family is safe when governments are not subject to the rule of law. Happy households and harmonious states go together. But in China, party leaders like Bo hold life-or-death power over citizens and their families.

For China's Communist Party, saving face is paramount. Bo will join a long line of incarcerated officials, though the special prisons where they are held may seem like recreation centers for retired senior officials when compared to the abusive and physically degrading conditions that the Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo and other prisoners have had to endure. Bo's son, Bo Guagua, will live an invisible life abroad.

So Bo is anything but a tragic figure. When he cries for his dead daughter Cordelia, King Lear comes to understand the personal flaws that brought about his demise. For this, he elicits sympathy. When Bo appears in court, however, his pleas will not be so persuasive. We may see in his face Lear's desperation: "Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones." But in the courtroom, and all over China, the audience will remain unmoved — and rightly so.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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