

# The New York Review of Books

## The New Chinese Gang of Seven

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*The Rise and Fall of the House of Bo: How a Murder Exposed the Cracks in China's Leadership*

by John Garnaut

Penguin, \$2.64 (e-book)



Lintao Zhang/Getty Images

*Xi Jinping (center), the new general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, with the newly announced Politburo Standing Committee's third-ranking member Zhang Dejiang (left) and second-ranking member Li Keqiang (right), in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, November 15, 2012*

In traditional Chinese religion, a *fashi*, or ritual master, will recite a set of phrases to turn an ordinary space into a sacred area where the gods can descend to receive prayers and rejuvenate the community. The ceremony can last days, with breaks and feasts, until the rites end and secular life resumes.

I was reminded of this while watching the Communist Party's eighteenth Congress unfold in mid-November in Beijing. The location was the auditorium at the Great Hall of the People, the gargantuan, 170,000-square-meter temple to Communist Party power

off Tiananmen Square.

The hall was built with political-religious imagery in mind: the outward appearance is a fascist-totalitarian mixture of columns and severe lines, but the details are from traditional China's religious-political state. The pillars are adorned with lotus petals, a Buddhist symbol, and their number purposefully equals the twelve columns of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City. In a nod to traditional Chinese geomancy—the methods of divination based on ground markings and called feng shui—the entrance is slightly asymmetrical to the museum across the square to avoid having the main doors face a grave. Here the grave is the memorial to the martyrs of the revolution, an obelisk planted like a dagger in the middle of Tiananmen Square. As one of the main architects put it, he didn't want “the living” (in the Great Hall) to “face the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

The Great Hall can be rented out for business or academic meetings but at certain times of the political calendar it is transformed into a center of state ritual power. In this case it was the Communist Party's Congress, just the eighteenth in its ninety-year history.

Hu Jintao, the president of China and general secretary of the Communist Party, opened and closed the Congress with a series of incantations, reciting phrases—slogans, some might call them—meant to invoke the greats of Communist yore and to build up his own authority. Thus the 2,268 delegates heard much about Marx, Lenin, Mao, Deng, and “scientific development,” Hu's favorite phrase, which he later had enshrined in the Party's constitution—a move to make himself ideologically immortal.

Like a Daoist priest, Hu emulated an immortal, but instead of wearing the richly embroidered robes of a god, the sixty-nine-year-old went for more modern symbolism: dying his hair jet-black to make himself look ageless, and surrounding himself with banners like those found in a temple—these however conferring immortality (*wansui*) on the Communist Party.

Cynics might call this empty ritual, and yet it worked. As Hu spoke, he was watched by many of his aging predecessors. These elderly veterans have no formal role in the Party but their silent appearance conferred legitimacy on his actions, as did their attire, almost identical to his own down to the dyed hair. With their apparent blessing, Hu presented a “work report” that was really a list of his accomplishments, a eulogy to his decade in office that was now ending and a chance to rule from beyond the grave by determining his successors' policies.

Compared to the political-religious cult of Communist China's founder, Mao Zedong, this was all tastefully done. Hu did not bask in the adulation of hundreds of thousands of frenzied followers, or plaster his face on billboards around town. But it was an effort to invoke traditional China's political-religious order. Even the hostesses who served tea to delegates, dressed up like airline stewardesses from the 1950s with pillbox hats and tight dress suits, had a sacramental role. Called "ritual girls," they poured tea like synchronized acolytes, moving in lockstep up and down the rows of delegates, optically deflecting attention from the older men, most of them pudgy and sallow from the demands of their profession to eat, drink, and hold droning meetings like the eighteenth Party Congress, in which decisions are announced but never made.

Then it ended. A week later, with little explanation, China's new leadership team appeared in the Great Hall as if conjured up by Mr. Hu's actions. Yet Hu and most of the leadership were gone, replaced by the new Party boss, Xi Jinping, the future premier, Li Keqiang, and five other new faces who are to rule China for the next five years. The ritual was over, the master departed, and his successors had to face real-life problems that the ritual had not solved.

As controlled as the process seemed, this was just the second time in Communist China's sixty-three-year history that leadership has changed hands without a coup or crisis. Mao took power at the head of an army and his successor, Deng Xiaoping, only won power after a coup d'état removed Mao's allies. Deng had a series of proxies, settling on Jiang Zemin only after the Tiananmen Square uprising. After Deng died in 1997, Jiang soldiered on for another five years before grudgingly yielding to Hu, mostly according to plan, although not without elaborate backroom negotiations.<sup>2</sup> That peaceful transfer was duplicated with Hu presiding over Xi's ascension in November.

Xi is the son of a member of the founding generation of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Zhongxun, who served in a variety of posts before retiring in the late 1980s. That makes Xi a "princeling," a new quasi-aristocratic class in China descended from that first generation of Communist leaders. It also helps clarify how he rose to the top, something that is otherwise hard to explain.

Xi had the foresight to leave a cushy job in Beijing in the early 1980s for a position as a county administrator—a grassroots posting is good for one's résumé in any system. But he ran up against a wily local governor who disliked princelings and blocked his career. In 1985, Xi's family got him transferred to Fujian, a province run by one of his father's allies, but even there he didn't distinguish himself, climbing steadily but staying

seventeen years—hardly the career path of an up-and-comer. In 2002, he won another unremarkable promotion to take control of a bigger neighboring province, Zhejiang. But five years later Xi was improbably named to the Politburo Standing Committee. It was like an ordinary player on a sports team suddenly leading his side to the championship.

How did he do it? Like all choices of leadership in China, the decision to helicopter Xi to the very top was made in secret and can only be pieced together. Almost all political observers in Beijing believe he was aided by another princeling, Zeng Qinghong, the son of the minister of security and a close ally of Jiang Zemin, who was dissatisfied with Hu. Promoting Xi was a way for Jiang to sandbag Hu and move into power someone he felt closer to. In any case, when the Standing Committee was unveiled five years ago, Xi was not only on it but ranked higher than Hu's man, the presumed favorite Li Keqiang, who was left with the post of premier. That will put him in charge of the bureaucracy and, if tradition matters, economic policy, but very much in second place to Xi.

Although a surprise, the decision fits a pattern of putting Party insiders in the most powerful positions and using experts only for government jobs that require technical expertise. That was the pattern for the outgoing administration, which had Hu as the insider and Wen Jiabao as the hired gun to run the economy. Previously, Jiang was the organization man anointed by Deng and he relied on Zhu Rongji to fix a series of economic problems and get China into the World Trade Organization.

The problem with this model is defining who is the insider. Hu Jintao built up his power through Party institutions, especially the Communist Youth League, but didn't come from a Red aristocratic background. Under his reign China largely harvested the fruits of the reforms from the Jiang-Zhu years, implementing only easy reforms—those that require spending money—as it built up a rudimentary system of social services, while ignoring the predatory role of large state enterprises.<sup>3</sup> Critics said that Hu lacked the personal network of obligations that Deng or even Jiang had accumulated, making it hard for him to force the country's powerful vested interests—the state enterprises, military, planning bureaucracies, and coastal provinces—to stand down when necessary.

According to one way of thinking, Xi's role as a princeling will give him this heft and bring in a new era of reform. In addition, Xi was able to assume chairmanship of the Central Military Commission from Hu, marking the first time in decades that a new leader has taken all the reins of power in one fell swoop. This could give him even more

authority to pursue bolder objectives. While anything is possible, nothing from Xi's background suggests that he is a risk-taker or is able to crack heads. When he was elevated in 2007 to the Standing Committee, a blog post cast aspersions on his intellect, saying he had gotten into Tsinghua University in 1975, before the start of competitive examinations, only on the strength of his princeling background. With no high school education, Xi took a course that resembled a community college remedial program. He later earned a doctorate but the thesis was on Marxist-Leninist thought and is under lock and key. All of this may be unfair. One of Germany's most successful political leaders in modern times was Helmut Kohl, who was famously obtuse and likewise wrote a thin thesis that no one was allowed to read.

Xi's perceived weaknesses were enough to encourage at least one challenger: Bo Xilai. He was another princeling—his father was a famous general and more of a kingmaker than Xi's father, who had opposed the Tiananmen Square massacre and therefore was largely sidelined for the last dozen years of his life. By contrast, Bo's father had stood by Deng and had enormous influence.

Bo was also charismatic and outgoing; at six-foot-one he is big by Chinese standards and ruggedly handsome (Xi, by contrast, is a bit roly-poly). He also had a more traditional upward career trajectory, moving from mayor of a city to governor of a province, provincial Party secretary, and then commerce minister. A nakedly ambitious man, he courted the media, and his press conferences at the annual sessions of parliament were colorful affairs. Little wonder then that in 2007 while the quiet Xi was being catapulted to the top, Bo was shunted off to run the city-state of Chongqing in southwestern China. In China's system of collective leadership, showboaters like Bo are unwelcome, even if foreigners are impressed. (In fact there's probably a negative correlation between how popular Westerners find Chinese politicians and their real power.)

Bo, however, didn't give up and kept himself in the news nationally by tackling two of China's biggest systemic problems. One is the country's spiritual vacuum, which was brought on by the destruction of the traditional religious system during the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, and then the collapse of its ersatz replacement, the Mao cult.<sup>4</sup> Bo decided to turn back to the Mao era, instituting a program of "singing Red songs." Companies and government organizations were encouraged—in fact, essentially ordered—to stage glee-club-type meetings and competitions where old Communist songs were sung. Forward-looking Chinese were appalled at the romanticizing of the Maoist dictatorship, but when I went to Chongqing

earlier this year, some spoke fondly of the exercises as something done collectively—in a country with few opportunities to meet in a public sphere, be it in politics or religion, these competitions forged a sense of community, at least for some.

Bo also beautified Chongqing by planting trees and banning many billboards, and he made police more accessible. Again liberals recoiled, but when a friend of mine traveled to the region during Bo's heyday a couple of years ago, he found that many people supported Bo for having reasserted control over an anarchic city.

Most controversial was his attack on the city's notorious mafia. He brought in a brutal law enforcement official, Wang Lijun, who had served Bo in previous stints, and let him run wild. Wang used gang-style methods—torture, blackmail, and kidnapping—against the mafia. He broke the big crime bosses, often in theatrical style, in one case dragging a mafia lawyer back to Chongqing and greeting him on the airport tarmac, backlit by the flashing lights of police cars. “Li Zhuang, we meet again!” he is reported to have said.



AFP/Getty Images

*A woman carrying a portrait of Bo Xilai after a Red Culture gathering where workers sang revolutionary songs, Chongqing, June 2011*

That anecdote is related in Australian reporter John Garnaut's brief but illuminating e-book, *The Rise and Fall of the House of Bo*, which describes Bo's career in about 28,000 words. Garnaut has made a name for himself by reporting on the princeling faction in Chinese politics with articles appearing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, and *Foreign Policy*. As in any instant book, the writing feels a bit rushed, and because it's still unfolding, the story is not complete. But it's by far the most carefully researched and sober analysis of a scandal that has fascinated the world as few other Chinese political stories have done.

One of Garnaut's chief accomplishments is to put the death of the British businessman Neil Heywood in perspective. Until now, foreign media have been jousting to report the latest tidbits that they've squeezed from Heywood's friends, colleagues, and the British diplomats who handled the case. As Garnaut's book shows, this attention is misplaced.

Heywood had been a low-level British middleman in Beijing who had gotten to know the Bo family and tried to parlay that into a job as a door-opener. For reasons still

unclear, Bo's wife, the lawyer Gu Kailai, asked him to visit Chongqing last November and had him murdered in a grisly fashion—by most accounts getting the teetotaler drunk and then pouring a cyanide mixture down his throat after he'd vomited and asked for water.

No one has explained why she did this, except that she was becoming unhinged and, rightly or wrongly, felt that Heywood was a threat to her son. The two possibly had a dispute over a real estate transaction. Heywood had asked for money and she decided to do him in. This is the gist of the official story issued at her murder trial, which took place in August, and Garnaut is convincing when he says that we may never know more than this.

In any case, the details are largely irrelevant now because Heywood was essentially the cudgel used to kill Bo. While a murder weapon is important it's usually more relevant to look at who acted and why.

At first, no one knew Heywood had been murdered. Wang, Bo's loyal cop, hushed it up but kept a recording of Gu talking about the murder and allegedly a blood sample showing the cyanide. The reason he kept the evidence is that, according to Garnaut's persuasive analysis, Wang knew that anticorruption investigators from Beijing were on his trail and he wanted to have something in case Bo tried to dump him. The investigators were headed by one of Bo's predecessors in Chongqing who had had a close relationship with one of the crime bosses Bo had had tried and executed. The investigator wanted revenge and went after Bo through Wang, digging through his past dealings in a northeastern city where Wang had served. In essence, the flamboyant Bo had made one too many enemies and now they were circling.

When the investigators got close, Wang went to Bo earlier this year seeking help. Bo declined and, in February, Wang took the evidence to the US consulate in nearby Chengdu, knowing that it was the only way to make sure the evidence was not destroyed. If he'd stayed in Chongqing, Wang reasoned, Bo would have had him murdered. So he made sure he attracted national attention, hoping he would be arrested by national state security and taken to Beijing for interrogation—which is exactly what happened.

In this much more logical way of looking at things, Heywood was an unlucky person but not particularly relevant. He was an ideal case for Wang to make public because corruption—which Wang undoubtedly could have proven of Bo—is endemic among



senior leaders and might not have ensured Bo's fall. Plus, the fact that Heywood was a foreigner was a bonus, making it an international incident and harder to hush up. And indeed after the story was broken by a Shanghai intellectual, who put the information on his microblog, the Western media jumped on the story, with first Reuters and then *The Wall Street Journal* reporting the shocking news.

The problem with focusing on Heywood—what suits he wore, where he worked, what cars he drove, whether he'd met members of the British intelligence service MI6—is that none of it matters to the real story, which was the efforts to take down Bo. Heywood's death didn't cause the scandal; he was dead and cremated months before Wang decided to use his case to get at his boss. Of course, the corruption investigators couldn't have known that Bo would fall in such a spectacular fashion, but the result was the same: Bo was out of the game. If Heywood hadn't been around, it's reasonable to assume that Wang would have found another way to take down his boss.

One has to ask oneself if any of this matters. Bo was a Politburo member but a long shot for the Standing Committee, the seven-member body that runs China. No one who behaved like Bo—courting the media, boasting of his accomplishments, initiating national projects like the Red songs and violent anticorruption campaign—can be seen as a serious contender for the very top. Instead, Bo's were clearly last-ditch efforts to reverse his downward trajectory.

But the case does matter on several levels. For one, although China's top leaders are probably not as dysfunctional, craven, and vile as the Bo family, the story of Bo opens a window into how politics are played out at China's elite levels. As investigations by Bloomberg into Xi's family and by *The New York Times* into outgoing premier Wen Jiabao's family have shown, checks and balances are almost null for the families of senior leaders, allowing at least the family members to acquire vast fortunes.<sup>5</sup> Murder doesn't seem far-fetched in a system where leaders, especially in a remote province like Chongqing, control all the levers of power and can easily cover up crimes.

More directly, Bo's implosion may have set the way for a more conservative group of leaders than previously expected. At this point it's hard to know the dynamics of the past six months but it's clear that Hu's faction has been weakened by the pyrotechnics, possibly because one of his closest associates became enmeshed in efforts to deal with Wang after police had escorted him back to Beijing.

What is clear is that by the summer, Hu was fighting off his longtime nemesis and



predecessor, Jiang, now eighty-six, who had been ill but suddenly had recovered. By the early autumn, it appeared that a consensus had formed to cut the Standing Committee to seven members from nine, a move that forced off two of Hu's favorites. That decision held, and a seven-man Standing Committee was announced on November 15, exactly one year after Neil Heywood was reported dead in Chongqing.

The new leaders have many things in common. All are tried-and-true, low-key Party veterans who had pushed for fast economic growth, but exclusively inside the parameters of a dominant state with strong political control. None is particularly known for innovative ideas or thinking; for better or worse, there's no Bo Xilai among them. That is arguably a result of the Bo scandal; the lesson is to pick even safer people for the top.

Another is age. Xi is fifty-nine and Li is fifty-seven but the rest are near retirees. Wang Qishan, an economics expert and the new head of anticorruption efforts, is sixty-four. Zhang Dejiang, a Jiang man and widely viewed as particularly concerned with control of the bureaucracy, is sixty-six. Shanghai boss Yu Zhengsheng, a princeling whose ancestors served the Qing court, the Republican government, and Mao, is sixty-seven. Propaganda chief Liu Yunshan (the only clear Hu protégé) is sixty-five. Finally, another Jiang man, Tianjin Party chief Zhang Gaoli, is sixty-five.

Left off of the Standing Committee was Wang Yang, the fifty-seven-year-old blunt-spoken Party secretary of Guangdong. Although his reformist credentials may be overplayed, he was one of the best hopes that reformers had.

One effect of leaving off younger leaders may be to damage longer-term stability. Part of the effort to institutionalize politics in post-strongman China is that leaders are, in theory, not supposed to take a post if they're older than sixty-five. If this is true, then already at the nineteenth Party Congress, five of the seven members will retire, with only Xi and Li certain to remain. That could make it harder to build continuity and choose a successor, who is supposed to be anointed in five years.

As for what the new government will do, Li could be sympathetic to reforming state enterprises. Earlier this year, he signed off on a World Bank report that called for curbing their powers and freeing up private enterprise. This will be difficult given that many of the country's largest state enterprises are powerful monopolies with tight ties to the Politburo and the security apparatus—the outgoing security czar, Zhou Yongkang, for example, had played an important part in the oil industry and in suppressing Uighur

activists in western Xinjiang province. But Li is one of the country's best-educated leaders in recent history and as a graduate student he even translated into Chinese *The Due Process of Law* by Lord Denning, one of the twentieth century's most famous judges. When Li visited England a few years ago, he gave a speech at the Old Bailey courthouses, where Lord Denning had served.

Xi could also use his new corruption fighter, Wang Qishan, to launch a Party "rectification" campaign. Pitched as a big anticorruption drive, it would be popular and echo some of Bo's efforts. It would also allow Xi to assert control over the Party. Xi hinted as much at his address to the nation on November 15, saying that some members of the Party were corrupt and misused power.

But this would have a ritualized feel to it as well. For decades, the Party has been fighting corruption through spectacles, sacrifices, and ceremonies: making arrests, exposing a Politburo member or two, and then announcing that all is well. The problem is that unlike the ceremony anointing Xi as the new leader, these policy-driven rituals truly are empty.

Another challenge facing the Party was the men on stage with Hu when he played his last role. Just as Hu had Jiang looking over his shoulder for his decade in office, Xi will have Hu, who at sixty-nine is seven years younger than Jiang when he stepped down. By some counts, Xi will have twenty current and former Standing Committee members to assuage, coddle, and battle. This combination may make it hard for Xi to do much of anything other than keep the flame burning.

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1. 1  
This and other details on the religious-political aspects of the hall are taken from Chang-tai Hung, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (Cornell University Press, 2011), which I reviewed in "[The High Price of the New Beijing](#)," *The New York Review*, June 23, 2011. ↩
  2. 2  
See Andrew J. Nathan and Bruce Gilley, *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* (New York Review Books, second, revised edition, 2003). ↩
  3. 3  
See my "[China's Lost Decade](#)," *The New York Review*, September 27, 2012. ↩

4. 4

See my “[China Gets Religion!](#),” *The New York Review*, December 22, 2011. ↩

5. 5

In the interests of disclosure, I also write for *The New York Times* but did not participate in the article on Wen. ↩

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