

FOCUS

FOCUS

Bo Xilai: his descent into darkness

After heady years spent climbing the party ladder, the colourful life of Bo Xilai will be judged by what happens in a grim Shandong court

Keith Zhai
keith.zhai@scmp.com

January, 2012

No 36 Zhongshansi Road, a compound of rust-coloured villas secluded behind thick foliage in downtown Chongqing (重慶), is easily ignored from the street. And that is just the way the people who live there like it.

There are no names on the brick houses and the armed soldiers at the gate ensure what goes on inside stays there.

There is good reason for the secrecy. No 36 Zhongshansi Road is where the power is.

Inside, Bo Xilai (薄熙來), one of the Communist Party's highest-flying officials, was the king of his domain.

He was sometimes referred to by local officials as "building No 3", after the house in which his family lived. Bo rode a wave that swept him to the top of the megacity of 32 million people and onto the national stage.

Had he clung on a bit longer, the 64-year-old would very possibly have joined the Standing Committee of the Politburo at the 18th party congress, and perhaps climbed even higher.

But even the best-laid plans can be derailed.

The governor's fortunes started to unravel in building No 1 of the compound on the morning of January 29 last year when he slapped his trusted crime-buster Wang Lijun (王立軍) in the face.



Bo Xilai at a party gathering just before his downfall last year.

Bo was confident his family ties were up to any task and thus became too reckless

A SOURCE CLOSE TO BO'S FAMILY

Bo is mad. "Ingrate," he yells at Wang. He smashes a glass and waves his hand in Wang's face.

Wang unsuccessfully tries to dodge the slap. Blood streams out of his mouth, according to senior police officers and businessmen who were later told of the clash.

"The conflict was made public after Wang was slapped," said Gu Weiguo (郭維國), former deputy police chief of the municipality and a protégé of Wang's, according to a report of his interrogation carried by Xinhua.

The slap happened a day after Wang told Bo that his wife, Gu Kailai (谷開來), was a key suspect in the murder two months earlier of British businessman Neil Heywood. Wang, who initially helped Gu cover up the murder, wanted to review the case after his relationship with Gu turned sour and his post was threatened by a probe by party disciplinary watchdogs.

Wang's flight

Several sources said Wang and Gu had an intimate relationship. Wang was the only person Bo could get into building No 3 at any time without permission. A leading lawyer said Bo was angry after learning of his wife's affair with Wang.

"Wang was trying to threaten Bo in the hope that Bo could protect him from the investigation, but Bo would never tolerate such a threat," said a Chongqing businessman and Bo adviser. "Wang was nothing but a tool for him to reach the peak of his power. He had made it clear he was the boss since coming to Chongqing."

When Wang found out a few days later that three colleagues were also under investigation, he

thought about fleeing, Xinhua reported.

Gu and Wang had lunch in a private room at police headquarters on February 4. Waiters outside the room heard Gu crying.

On February 6, Wang sought refuge in the US consulate in Chengde (承德), where he told US diplomats about Gu's involvement in Heywood's murder.

Wang's dramatic escape made headlines around the world the next day. But Bo carried on as usual, going on a sightseeing tour in Yunnan (雲南) and feeding the seagulls at Dian Lake, near Kunming (昆明). The provincial capital is also home to the 14th Group Army, a People's Liberation Army unit led by Bo's father, Bo Yibo (薄一波), in the 1930s.

Local media reported that Bo was there to "cherish the memory of revolutionary ancestors". But online sites were running hot with speculation that with his career facing disaster, Bo was courting political support from the military.

A person with close ties with Bo's family said he had been unflinching and remained confident he could turn the situation around. He said Bo looked relaxed and there were few signs of anxiety at a family reunion dinner in Beijing in early March.

"Bo gave his family members the impression that he would handle Wang's defection attempt well," the person said. "As a princeling [son of a revolutionary leader], Bo was excessively confident his family connections were up to any task and thus became too reckless."

On the defensive

On March 9, in Beijing's Great Hall of the People during the clearly left a deep impression on young Bo, who practised similar ideas decades later in Chongqing.

More than 150 journalists crowded into the large meeting room to soak up his every word, with hundreds more blocked from entering. Bo held court in the middle of the room, smiling confidently. After innocuous questions from state-controlled media, a Japanese correspondent from the *Asahi* newspaper finally raised the issue of his right-hand man's dramatic move.

"After this problem arose, I felt sad," Bo replied in a clear, soft voice. "There was negligence on my part when I appointed people."

Just then, his phone vibrated and, after checking the number, he left the room, telling Chongqing major Huang Qifan (黃奇帆), who was sitting next to him, to "go on answering the questions".

When he returned a few minutes later he became agitated and began to defend his family. "Some people are pouring dirty water on Chongqing, myself and my family," Bo said. "They even said my son, who is studying abroad, was driving a red Ferrari. It is total nonsense. It makes me very mad."

Bo and Gu's 25-year-old son, Bo Guoguo (薄瓜瓜), has denied driving a red Ferrari to the Beijing residence of then US ambassador Jon Huntsman in 2011 to pick up his daughter for a date. The younger Bo is now

enrolled at New York's Columbia Law School.

As he spoke of his anger, Bo leaned back and laughed. "Not only my son, but my wife and I have no personal assets ... my wife closed her law firm 20 years ago to avoid gossip ... I'm very touched and feel deeply sorry for her sacrifice."

The details of the mysterious phone call remain unclear, but some insiders say it was from his brother Bo Xicheng, telling him Gu had been detained.

Five days later, then-premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) said in his annual press conference on the last day of the NPC session that the authorities should learn lessons from Wang's attempted defection.

"We will give the people the results of the investigation and the handling [of the case], so that it can withstand the test of law and history," Wen said. He then launched into a criticism of Chongqing's leadership, without mentioning Bo by name.

While the speech was not a sentence handed down by a court, in a country where politics trumps the judiciary it signalled Bo's political doom.

It's a system that Bo must understand well.

'Great prospects'

Born in Beijing three months before Mao Zedong (毛澤東) proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic in October 1949, Bo is the fourth son of the late Bo Yibo, a revolutionary hero who emerged as a prominent figure in the new government.

The young Bo grew up at a time of national optimism, with Mao declaring that China would take its place as the most powerful country in the world.

Mao's emphasis on the political mobilisation of ordinary citizens, especially the poor, clearly left a deep impression on young Bo, who practised similar ideas decades later in Chongqing.

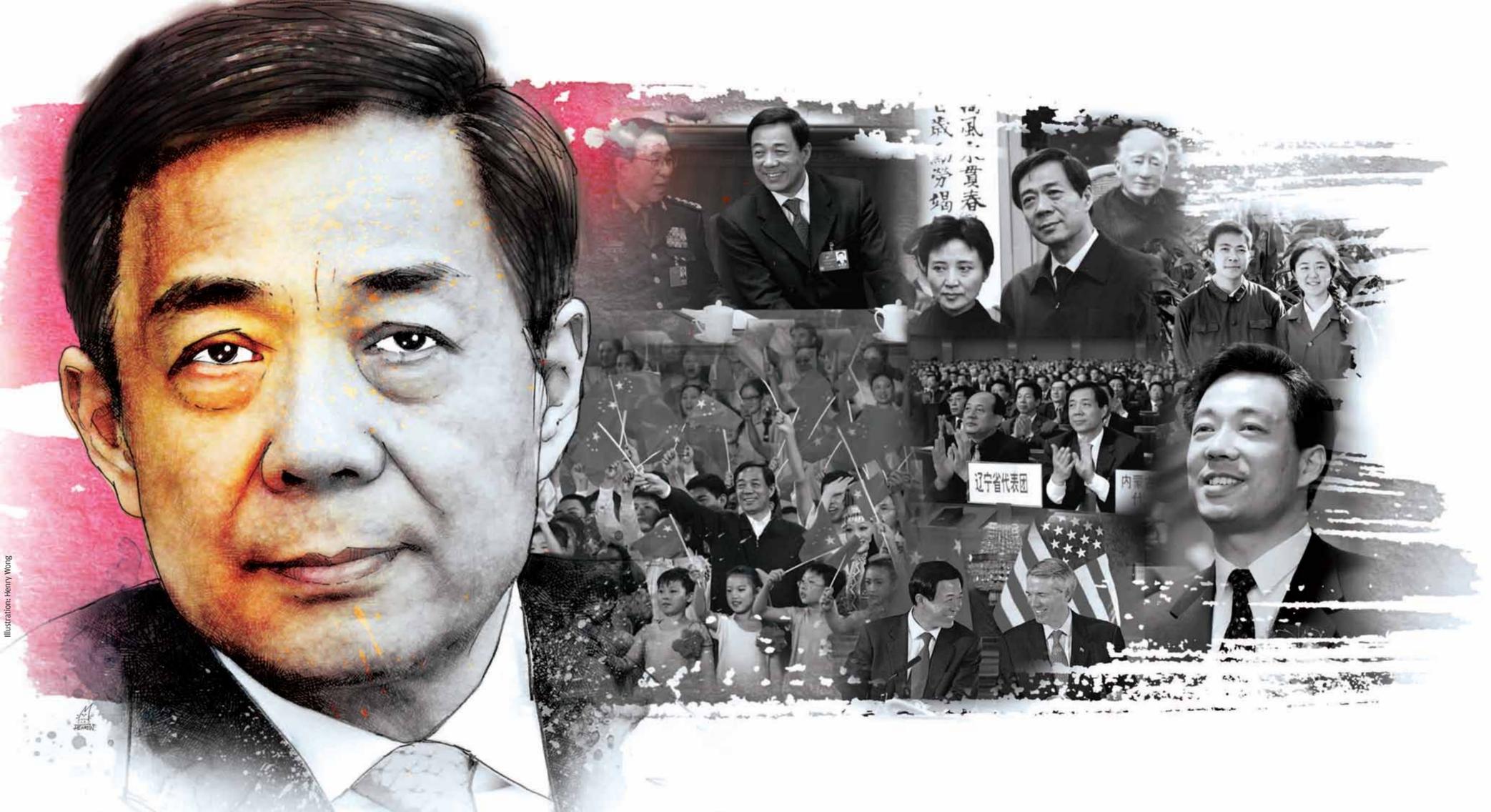
"In Mao's ideology, the masses were the source of his power, and it was important to get their support," said historian Zhang Lifan (張立凡). "Bo is a blind follower of Mao's ideology. He loves the mass campaigns. His life was turned upside down in 1966 when Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. Bo's father was labelled a "rightist" and a "counter-revolutionary" and purged from his posts. Bo suffered too, spending five years in a labour camp.

His father was tortured and his mother, Hu Ming, committed suicide, according to official accounts, though some historians say she died after being torture by red guards. The accusations stemmed from a power struggle between Mao and former Politburo Standing Committee chairman Liu Shaohui (劉少奇). Bo's father was widely seen as a close ally of Liu.

After being released in 1972, Bo worked at a machine repair factory in Beijing. He enrolled at the prestigious Peking University in 1977, after taking the first university entrance exam after its reinstatement after a decade of nationwide chaos.

Unlike many of his contemporaries in the party leadership who studied engineering, Bo decided on law and worked in the party's elite Central Committee. A retired official in Shenyang disliked him. He was insolent, easily got mad and verbally abused other people," the former official said. "He believed he was a princeling and should be treated differently."

Some critics said the growth had much to do with Bo's father who, although retired, remained close to then president Jiang Zemin (江澤民). Jiang visited the port city on its 100th anniversary in August 1999 and stayed for an



Illustrator: Henry Wong

programme in international journalism at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, graduating in 1982.

Hu Sisheng, a former reporter with the party mouthpiece *People's Daily*, was one of his supervisors. "Bo Xilai was a young man with great prospects. He had no government ranking, no money, but dreamed of being a reporter on international affairs," Hu wrote in his memoir.

Bo didn't become a journalist.

Like most mainland journalists students at the time, he studied the Marxist view of journalism, which holds that news and publications are weapons to be used by the authorities and that the wellbeing of the party came

ahead of individual liberty. Bo learned well, and later went on to become exceptionally skilled in manipulating media coverage to boost his public profile.

Politician on the rise

In 1984, Bo became the party head of Jin county, an underdeveloped part of Dalian (大連), Liaoning (遼寧). His father, who was rehabilitated in 1978, was the country's top political adviser at the time.

The low-key appointment was avoided by some as an attempt to avoid allegations of nepotism. Bo received little attention as a low-ranking official but when he became more famous, in 2001, state media recalled his days in Jin county and praised him for "managing the next 10 years in perfect order".

In a system where regional officials are judged largely on their economic prowess, Bo did a great job, with Dalian's GDP growing more than 12 per cent a year, more than the country's average.

Some critics said the growth had much to do with Bo's father who, although retired, remained close to then president Jiang Zemin (江澤民). Jiang visited the port city on its 100th anniversary in August 1999 and stayed for an

unusually long 10 days. During the trip, he wrote a piece of calligraphy describing the city as a "pearl of the north".

Regardless, the city's residents appreciated the improved infrastructure and public facilities and mainland media hailed Dalian as the country's "most beautiful city".

Bo enjoyed the applause and stepped up landscaping projects and propaganda. He instructed that a type of grass known as *xilai* - pronounced the same as his given name, though written using different Chinese characters - be planted all over the city so that whenever tourists or party leaders visited they would see vast expanses of grass and new parks and plazas.

Despite his achievements in Dalian and his princeling background, Bo failed to win election to the party's 15th national congress in 1997, which could have secured his elevation to the party's elite Central Committee. A retired official in Shenyang said resentment among local officials was the biggest factor.

"Many higher-up officials in Liaoning disliked him. He was insolent, easily got mad and verbally abused other people," the former official said. "He believed he was a princeling and should be treated differently."

Governor and minister

Despite their opposition, Bo was named Liaoning governor in 2001.

The day he left Dalian for his new posting, the citizens swarmed into the streets waving banners and posters saying farewell. He shook hands with thousands and thanked them

profusely. "The whole town turned out to say goodbye to their good mayor Bo," local media reported, adding that it took Bo more than half an hour to walk 200 metres because he was surrounded by so many people.

The story was picked up by media nationwide, and commentators compared him to honest and upright officials from China's ancient history. But those who disliked him suspected that everything he did in the city was just a show.

Liaoning party secretary Wen Shizhen, technically Bo's superior, criticised him on many occasions - without naming him - for "developing the city like Europe but the countryside like Africa".

"Officials who love vanity projects are those eagerly seeking quick success and instant benefits," Wen said in a 2005 interview with *Oriental Outlook*. "Most of the projects are not urgently needed but only serve as shows to impress higher officials."

On the sidelines of last year's party congress, when asked for his thoughts on the downfall of Bo, Wen burst into laughter. "The criticism did not stop Bo rising further, and that may have reinforced his belief in the power of propaganda, leading to bigger shows of mass support that culminated in campaigns in Chongqing that contributed to his eventual downfall."

Bo started to gain international fame when he was named commerce minister in 2004. His shrewd negotiating skills, good English and liberal outlook made him a star as he handled trade disputes with the

United States and Europe and attracted additional foreign investment.

But one ministry official said people were scared of Bo because he would shout abuse at anyone he was dissatisfied with. "He was like the king and took the ministry as his personal territory," the official said.

Bo also attracted many supporters no matter where he worked. *China Comment*, a popular party magazine, reported that a stand at a trade fair collapsed because too many people squeezed onto it, trying to catch a glimpse of Bo. It also said that its reporter noticed a tall, beautiful woman standing next to Bo during an interview. She later said she was a big fan and had pretended to be a reporter to get close to him.

There was another dramatic scene when Bo left his ministerial position in late 2007. A video posted online showed him walking the red carpet at a farewell party. He made a speech while holding the arm of his mother-in-law, Fan Chengxi, who was also a revolutionary veteran. His wife Gu was standing behind them.

A 'springboard'

After being elevated to membership of the party's 25-man Politburo in 2007 Bo was sent to Chongqing, taking over from Wang Yang (汪洋), now a vice-premier, in the southwestern metropolis. "He wanted nothing but

quick success, so everything he did in Chongqing was aimed at going back to Beijing to become someone bigger," said the Chongqing businessman. "Chongqing was his springboard."

After he arrived in Chongqing, Bo invited a group of local figures to make suggestions for managing the city. But at least one businessman soon found out that Bo only wanted to work on things that offered fast returns. "I made some suggestions on education and to provide a better environment for poor kids, but Bo's assistant Wu Wenkang told me those proposals were time consuming and it would be hard for them to have a huge impact on the country," the businessman said.

He embarked on a series of spectacular campaigns to stay in the national limelight, including the staging of mass public gatherings to sing nostalgic, revolutionary songs, while also launching heavy-handed crackdowns on organised crime. At the same time the city launched its most ambitious low-income rental housing scheme and a massive tree-planting campaign, in which the government spent billions of yuan on ginkgo trees.

"Bo loves the ginkgo tree because it's tall and noble, just like him," said a district-level police chief, who had to spend 600,000 yuan to plant two ginkgo trees in front of his offices to please Bo. Ordinary citizens

complained about the expensive trees, but they still enjoyed telling visitors about their city's new look.

Bo had made fundamental, positive changes to the landscape and praised the affordable public housing and other welfare programmes.

The crackdown

While Bo found support among Chongqing's poor and working class by using state funds to boost consumption and invest in infrastructure, his high-profile campaigns raised eyebrows among the party elite.

His cracked down on officials who supported gangsters, including the municipality's police chief, Wen Qiang (文強), widely seen as a close ally of previous Chongqing party chiefs Wang Yang and He Guoqing (賀國強).

Bo's flamboyant bubble burst when Wen Qiang was executed soon after his verdict was announced, without even the chance to say farewell to his family. Analysts said top party leaders were alarmed by the move, sensing that it showed Bo was cold-blooded and would crack down on political enemies unmercifully.

The top leaders thought he would always make trouble for them," said Professor Mao Shoulong (毛壽龍), a political scientist at Renmin University. He was criticised for neglecting due process and using torture to extract confessions. Beijing-based lawyer Li Zhuang (李莊), who gave legal advice to criminal suspects, was convicted of fabricating evidence after being

\$160m
Bo's relatives are believed to have amassed a fortune of at least this much, in US dollars

Bo had made fundamental, positive changes to the landscape and praised the affordable public housing and other welfare programmes.

He also maintained a tight grip on the media, sending quotations from Mao to millions of mobile phone users and forcing the local television station to drop advertising and adopt programming that extolled revolutionary virtues. Bo summoned Chongqing

For people like Bo, the pursuit of absolute power has become a maniacal passion

LAWYER ZHANG SIZHI (BELOW)



tortured - a move critics said was designed to deter lawyers from helping suspects.

One local businessman, Chen Guixue (陳貴學), recalled that the police had once tormented him with the claim: "Don't you realise that our chief, Bo, will become the president in the future, and that our police boss Wang [Lijun] will become minister [of public security]?"

Chen, who was tortured for 37 days in a Chongqing motel room by police officers who wanted him to confess to bribery linked to former Chongqing mayor Wang Hongju (王鴻舉), said the police told him that Bo was the law. Wang, who became the city's mayor in 2002, was transferred in 2009.

"Soon after the start of the crackdown on the gangs, we sometimes ordered several dissenting opinions had started," said the former deputy head of a district-level police bureau, who was purged after his brother was imprisoned for being a close ally of Wen Qiang and Wang Hongju.

Silencing dissent

As well as attacking gangs, Bo launched a vigorous campaign to promote traditional communist ideology, sending bureaucrats to work alongside farmers in the countryside and dragging them into his revolutionary song festivals.

He also maintained a tight grip on the media, sending quotations from Mao to millions of mobile phone users and forcing the local television station to drop advertising and adopt programming that extolled revolutionary virtues. Bo summoned Chongqing

television officials to a meeting in late 2010, where he suggested all advertising from the start of 2011.

"Chief Bo, the problem is we have sold the advertising for next year," a station director told him. "I don't care. You don't talk about money with me." Bo said angrily, according to a person from the city's propaganda

organs who was briefed about the meeting. He pulled a sheet of paper from his jacket and said: "Take a look. I have a list of shows that you can air on the channel."

After that, the person who was briefed said, everyone in the room realised Bo had made his decision and there was nothing more to discuss. He also said Bo checked video footage of himself before it was broadcast and sometimes ordered several modifications. "He managed his image so carefully," the person said. "He knew what was important to him so that he could realise his goals."

The biggest red song festival was held in June 2011, with Bo inviting 108 choirs from across the mainland to participate at the Chongqing Olympic Centre. More than 100,000 people were involved, waving red flags and singing patriotic songs.

These are songs that have saved the nation, built up the nation and strengthened the nation ... There are some who say, is this not too 'leftist'? Is this not a return to the Cultural Revolution? If only you could be there to experience it for yourself, you would know that that is not the case," Bo told the *Chongqing Daily*. But if Bo saw the video footage of himself standing on top of the sports centre waving

to his fans, he might well be reminded of classic images of Mao on the Tiananmen rostrum welcoming his red guards.

Bo's powers had peaked. Today, little more than two years later, Bo is in a prison cell, facing a trial that day that will dictate the rest of his life. "Bo's problem was that he had too much power. The lust for power was the only goal of his life," said Zhang Sizhi (張思之), the country's most eminent lawyer. "He would have become another Mao if he grabbed more power."

Zhang, who defended the leftist leftists led by Mao's widow Jiang Qing (江青), said Bo's case reflected the drawback of the entire bureaucratic system. "Because of the lack of supervision and balance of power, Bo's saga could happen to any official in the country. For people like him, the pursuit of absolute power has become a maniacal passion," he said.

The master of the compound at 36 Zhongshansi Road is now Sun Zhengai (孫政才), one of just two members of the Politburo born after 1980 and a front runner to join the next generation of national leaders.

The villas don't seem to have changed during all the drama of the past year, still disengaged from the outside world, their inhabitants rarely bothering to peer through the thickets and brambles at their subjects, who are left to wonder at it all.