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INTRIGUE: MURDER IN THE LUCKY HOLIDAY HOTEL – a Chinese House of Cards meets Agatha Christie.

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Abstract

Intrigue: Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel is a podcast that is Agatha Christie meets House of Cards with an Oriental twist. It tells the story of the downfall of Bo Xilai, a once powerful and charismatic politician, who could have eclipsed current President Xi Jinping as a future leader of China if the cards fell his way. Despite the challenges of reporting in China, BBC China Editor Carrie Gracie is able to explain with clarity the tale of money, sex and power than unravelled Bo Xilai.

Gracie guides us through her five-part series with clear knowledge of her beat of 25 years. She is upfront about the many restrictions and hardships involved in reporting on an important tale from one of the world's most repressive superpowers. Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, Gracie is a charismatic, jovial presenter, who delivers the story with zest. This podcast is very different listening to the straight-laced reportage from the BBC's network of correspondents around the world. Considered in a broader journalist context, *Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel* offers foreign correspondents based in bureaus around the world a blueprint for what is possible in terms of creative podcasting. It's refreshing to see a foreign correspondent dive deep and explain an important chapter of Chinese politics with simplicity and flair.

Keywords

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

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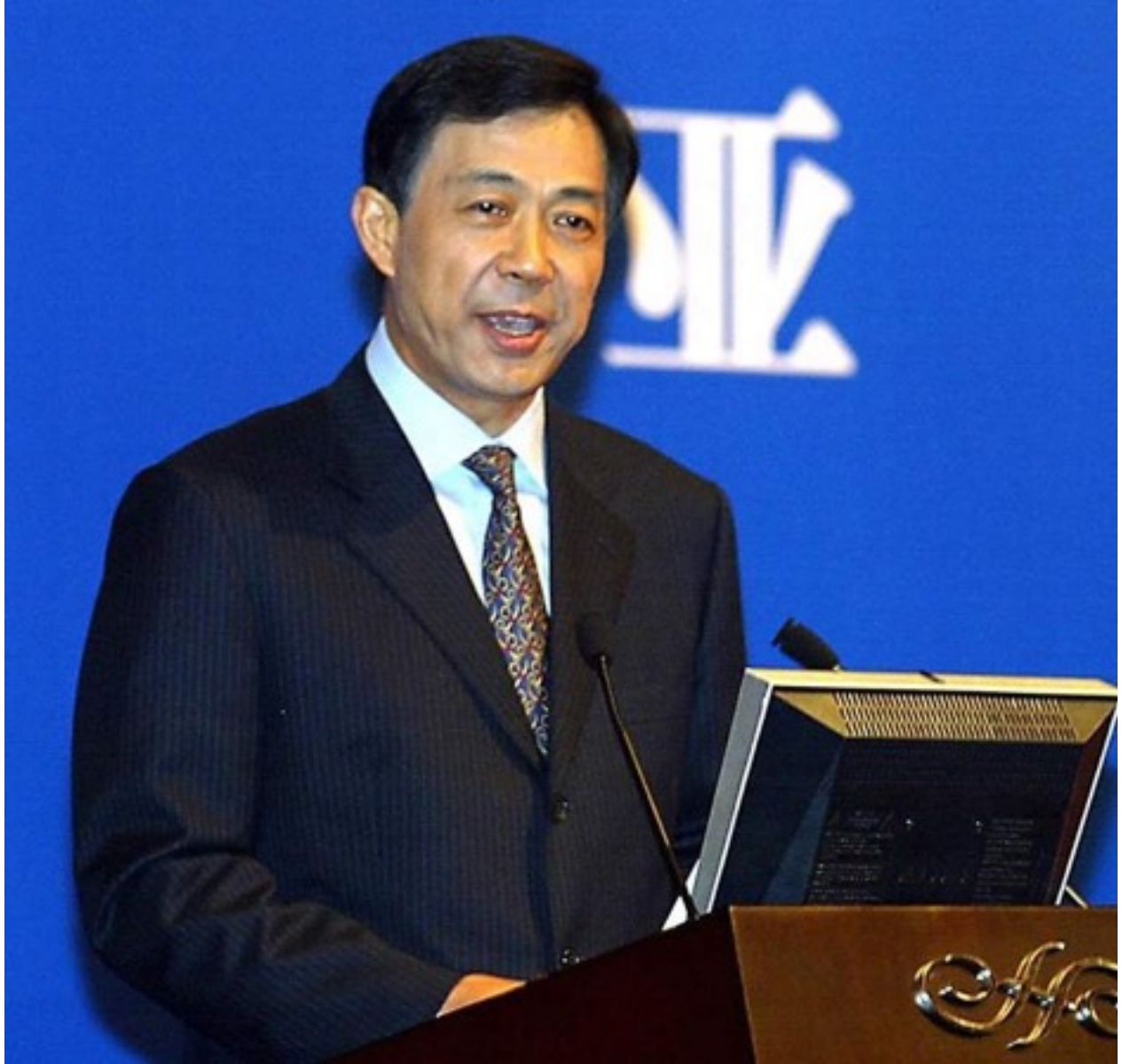
Reviewed by Drew Ambrose

We have a young Englishman on the make, we have money to be made, we have a fairytale first couple – China’s John and Jackie Kennedy, as some describe them – and they’ve now had a son, so we have a dynasty in the making. We are heading for a happy ending, right?... Wrong!

So begins *Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel* - a podcast that is Agatha Christie meets House of Cards with an Oriental twist. In an audio landscape dominated by American crime offerings, this is a must-listen for “China nerds”, as the host of this podcast, Carrie Gracie, calls them. The BBC China Editor guides us through her five-part series with clear knowledge of her beat of 25 years. She’s upfront as well about the many restrictions and hardships involved in reporting on an important tale from one of the world’s most repressive superpowers.

Gracie: There are no heroes in it - only villains and victims and it’s a descent into the dark heart of Chinese elite politics, which is dangerous. And that being the case, most of the people who know the story from the inside are dead, in jail or unwilling to talk.

Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, Gracie is a charismatic, jovial presenter, who delivers the story with zest. This podcast is very different listening to the straight-laced reportage from the BBC’s network of correspondents around the world. It’s not often that you hear a BBC presenter say “Take that, Mr Sex Machine!”, in reference to the downfall of the main protagonist in this story. But that relaxed approach is what makes this series an entertaining, accessible piece of journalism. Every episode is dedicated to a new player in the mystery and it’s well worth looking at the [online presentation](#) on the BBC website as well.



The “Mr Sex Machine” in question is Bo Xilai (pictured: photo credit, BBC).

The one-time Mayor of Dalian is arguably the most interesting and charismatic politician of his generation in China. During Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, he spent a decade shovelling coal, after his civil war-hero father was thrown in jail and his mother committed suicide. From Episode Two, the listener is informed about how Bo rose to power after this great period of adversity. Though he had his haters amongst Beijing’s political elite and was condemned to leadership roles in urban backwaters, Bo Xilai became a force of nature with eyes on China's ruling Politburo.

Compared by one interviewee to Bill Clinton, Bo Xilai was also a philanderer, who loved the spotlight and maintained influence with China’s criminal underworld. Cities like Chongqing and Dalian where Bo Xilai held sway – the setting for this podcast – were unheard of in the nineties. It was the showmanship of Bo Xilai that put these new cities of power on the map. As Gracie explains, the mayor had so much clout he was even able to stop drivers honking their horns on Dalian’s cacophonous streets.

Gracie: Bo Xilai was a mayor like no other... he turned a rustbelt port into a green and modern city. He built museums, five-star hotels, parks, squares; he was more like an emperor than a mayor.

This emperor could have easily eclipsed current President Xi Jinping as a future leader of China if the cards fell his way. Despite the challenges of reporting in China, Carrie Gracie is able to explain with clarity the tale of money, sex and power than unravelled Bo Xilai.

Much of the story is centred on Bo Xilai's second wife, Gu Kailai. Like Bo Xilai, she had humble beginnings but used her charisma to get what she wanted. Gracie sums her up beautifully: "not just a survivor but a striver". She had it all – a law firm and a politically powerful husband. Through forensic interviews with lawyer Larry Cheng and diplomat-turned-businessman James Richards, Gracie gives the listener an entertaining chronology on how Bo Xilai and Gu Kailai were China's main political power couple.

Given Bo Xilai's wandering eye, his wife deals with her loveless marriage by taking on a long list of lovers herself. Gu Kailai also tries to help shift her wealth overseas through tax havens and purchasing property abroad. She does this with the help of a British fixer, Neil Hayward. He even helps Gu Kailai to secure her princeling son a place in a plush Bournemouth school. Hayward is a teacher and businessman who mysteriously appears on the political scene. Gracie describes him as like a spy from a Graham Greene novel. You get the impression maybe he is involved with MI5.

Gracie: Tall and elegant, with his white linen suit in the summer and his tweeds in the winter, Neil Hayward must have stood out amid rusting factories and crumbling Soviet-style power blocks.

It's all going very well until November 2011, when Hayward, 41, is found dead in Chongqing's Lucky Holiday Hotel. The British Consulate in Chongqing is told that this moderate drinker died from excessive alcohol consumption. Chongqing is China's wild west and Bo Xilai rules the roost. Foul play is a strong possibility.

Gracie: This is China – if you control a city, you control the police, you control the court and you control the media. You can make people appear and you can make them disappear. Just remember that.

Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel not only examines the circumstances of Hayward's death, it gives the listener a realistic look into the life and times of China's super-rich. Given recent reports of Chinese officials buying properties abroad and influencing politicians via donations, it provides fascinating context re the inner machinations of the current regime. Carrie Gracie has worked very hard to secure strong interviewees, both in China and abroad.

My main criticism of *Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel* is that a lot of the atmosphere and reporting gathered in the field around Chongqing didn't really move the story along. For example when she first introduces the concept of travelling to this city to find out more information – she introduces some “atmos” sound but there is no real point to this reportage. The strength of the story lies in the comprehensive interviews Gracie did on the phone to interviewees based in Britain and Australia. Most of the recorded actuality and attempts to take the listener to the field felt a bit jarring and did not always fit smoothly into the telling of the story. A major exception is when Gracie goes to the scene of the murder in Chongqing. Without giving too much away- the hostile reception that she receives from the hotel proprietor is a chilling warning to back off the case. This also gives the listener an idea of the sensitivities involved in reporting on the Bo Xilai case.

Another good use of fieldwork by Gracie is recording people on the street who express their support and almost adoration of the fallen politician. Usually when someone falls from grace, they disappear from public discourse under repressive regimes. This does not seem to be the case with Bo Xilai.

Another criticism I would make is that the soundtrack is a bit repetitive and inappropriate for the mood Gracie was trying to convey. In one episode she uses a political jingle in support of Bo Xilai to the point of ad nauseam. Given that it's a complicated story, I think more ambient music could have been used; at times the music is a distraction.

Considered in a broader journalist context, *Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel* offers foreign correspondents based in bureaus around the world a blueprint for what is possible in terms of creative podcasting. At the moment, correspondent-driven podcasts such as the NPR-hosted *Embedded* feature presenters who don't know their beat that well and often parachute into countries. Whereas Gracie knows the players and politics very well.

Other examples such as *The DC Washup* by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's North America bureau summarise US politics in a conversational style, using correspondents and producers as presenters. Such weekly podcasts keep you abreast of international affairs but rarely dive deep. That is what is exhilarating about *Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel*. It's refreshing to see a foreign correspondent dive deep and explain an important chapter of Chinese politics with simplicity and flair. In five short episodes, *Murder in the Lucky Holiday Hotel* carves up this tale of political intrigue in a creative and compelling way.

DREW AMBROSE:

Drew Ambrose is a foreign correspondent and senior producer with Al Jazeera's flagship Asia-Pacific current affairs program, 101 East. Based in Kuala Lumpur, he has made television documentaries that range from remote Pacific islands and disaster zones to the streets of heaving Asian megacities. His work has won the New York Festival Gold Medal, the Asian Human Rights Press Award, the United Nations Media Peace Award and a Melbourne Press Club Quill, amongst other journalism prizes.

