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Dead British businessman in China had links to ex-MI6 officers' firm

Mystery deepens over in Chongqing death of Neil Heywood, occasional consultant to business intelligence firm Hakluyt & Co

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The British businessman whose sudden death has been linked to China's current leadership struggles worked as a consultant for a business intelligence firm founded by ex-MI6 officers, it has emerged.

Britain said on Sunday that it had asked China to investigate the sudden death of Neil Heywood in Chongqing last November. The 41-year-old had ties to Bo Xilai, the city's high-profile party boss, whose dismissal two weeks ago has sent shockwaves through Chinese politics in the runup to this autumn's leadership transition.

A spokesman for Hakluyt & Co said Heywood worked for them on a periodical basis and had not handled any work in the south-western city for them. "Neil had a long history of advising western companies on China and we were among those who sought his advice. We are greatly saddened by his death," he added.

Hakluyt services include strategic intelligence and due diligence. But such work can be sensitive in China, where businesses often have powerful ties to local officials.

Chongqing authorities reportedly blamed Heywood's death on excessive alcohol consumption and cremated his body without a postmortem, but people who knew him said he did not seem to be a heavy drinker.

According to the Wall Street Journal, suspicions about Heywood's death - including a claim that he could have been poisoned - were raised by Wang Lijun, formerly the Chongqing police chief and a close ally of Bo, when he fled to the US consulate in Chengdu in February. After leaving the consulate he was met by central government officials from Beijing and is now under investigation.

The US has declined to comment on whether he sought asylum, saying he left of his own volition.

According to the Wall Street Journal, Wang claimed relations had soured with Bo after he raised concerns about Heywood's death. He is also said to have claimed that Heywood had been in a business dispute involving Bo's wife, Gu Kailai.

There is no way of ascertaining the allegations and others have suggested Wang might have turned on Bo after clashing with him for other reasons. The Financial Times said a Bo family spokesman confirmed they knew Heywood but denied any business ties.

However, his family in the UK appeared to dismiss any suggestion of foul play. "My son died of a heart attack. I don't know why there's all these rumours. But I don't want to say anything else," his mother Ann, speaking from her home in Streatham, south London, told ITV News.

Heywood also worked as a non-executive board member for an Aston Martin dealership in Beijing and described himself as a consultant helping British firms move into China.

He told people he had helped Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill to promote her design services in China and photographs from 2010 show the two on a visit to a design school in Shanghai.

His biography shows a strong and early interest in global affairs.

After Harrow he read politics and international studies at Warwick University in the Midlands, graduating in the summer of 1992.

He appears to have been one of the university's more low-key students.

His tutors there have all retired.

One of his acquaintances told the Wall Street Journal that Heywood, from a upper middle-class British family, took pride in Britain's traditions, history, and institutions. Friends added that they were surprised when he moved to Beijing in his early 20s, after Warwick. It is thought he studied Mandarin at the Beijing Language and Culture University.

He later moved to Dalian, where he met and married a Chinese woman, before returning to the capital. The couple have two young children.

China's foreign ministry and officials in Chongqing have said they have no information on Heywood's case.

Given the sensitivity surrounding it - searches for his name were blocked on microblogs on Tuesday - rapid progress seems unlikely.

A shakeup in the wake of Bo's ousting has seen at least two senior Chongqing officials detained in recent days, and Bo's own fate remains uncertain. The party has yet to comment on whether he will keep his seat on its 25-member Politburo; a sign, say analysts, that leaders cannot agree.

Heywood appears to have met Bo in Dalian, where the politician served before promotion. He told acquaintances he had helped Gu to arrange for the couple's son Bo Guagua to attend Harrow, where Heywood himself had studied.

Bo Guagua read PPE at Balliol College, Oxford - a prestigious choice of subject at one of the university's most competitive colleges. He arrived in 2006. His party-going lifestyle and failure to keep up with the academic workload led to Balliol temporarily rustivating him. But he returned to the college and completed his degree in 2010, graduating with a 2:1.

He attempted a career at the Oxford Union, the debating society for wannabe politicians, and ran unsuccessfully to be librarian in 2009.

He was president of the PPE society and organised a university fundraising committee for the Sichuan earthquake.

His greatest social coup was arranging for film star Jackie Chan to give a lecture at the university. Heywood may also have helped him to organise a "Silk Road" ball there in 2008.

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