



BBC World Service
Zhou Yongkang, Anti-Corruption,
President Xi's Vision, CPC Book Series
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HOST: Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn is a world-renowned China expert and commentator, the author of *How China's Leaders Think*. Was anyone actually expecting the court to reach a verdict on Zhou Yongkang this quickly?

RLK: The general assumption was that the Party's anti-corruption campaign is vigorous and continuing and the outcome of this case was never in doubt; that it would be a secret trial as no one wanted to take any chances of outbursts. The verdict, even though it's life imprisonment, was expected to be somewhat harsher – the death penalty with a two-year stay, which would convert in to life imprisonment. But the sentence seems mollified by the fact that he apparently confessed and helped *recover* some of the funds that were illegally taken. So the sentence passed with less interest than perhaps it might have had—details have been leaked and discussed for two years, and so it's kind of anticlimactic, old news at this point.

HOST: I guess if you're the security chief of China, the possibility of corruption—or at least being involve in it—is really rather high.

RLK: It's not just his position as security chief. He ran the largest oil company and held a dominant position in industry. He was also head of Sichuan Province. He held several positions, any of which for a person of bad character could lead to serious corruption. He certainly had lots of opportunities, and he's not alone.

HOST: And he was put under investigation, I understand, as part of President Xi Jinping's major anti-corruption campaign, which has been one of the key tenets of his presidency, hasn't it?

RLK: President Xi's anti-corruption campaign certainly has been a critical policy priority that is extremely popular with the people - less so among the bureaucrats, as you can imagine. Zhou Yongkang is the highest-ranking person who has been caught—China talks about “caging tigers” and “swatting flies”—either they're very high level, or low level, wherever they are, if they are corrupt, they are going to be investigated and, if proven guilty, put in jail.



Things are not always simple anywhere, especially in China, and there are often multiple motivations. Certainly Zhou Yongkang is guilty of corruption, but he was, shall we say, not part of President Xi Jinping's allied supporters, and there have been many rumors about what he may have been doing. Even officially, in addition to egregious corruption and immorality, Zhou Yongkang was charged with engaging in "non-organizational political activity", which certainly seems a euphemism for doing things that are pretty wildly inappropriate in a political sense in China. Moreover, the arrest and imprisonment of Zhou helps with economic reform, by breaking up some of the vested interests that are stifling reform—reforms that are critically needed at this point, reforms that China has been trying to break through. Zhou was head a cabal-like group controlling the oil industry. So the fact that he was corrupt and was really a linchpin in some of these other matters, it certainly is, you know, taking one stone to kill a handful of birds.

HOST: How did Zhou actually come to be called? How did they find him?

RLK: I think his corruption was probably well known. What you saw in China was probably a very high level of rumors that he had been doing illegal things, but without proof—and China is very careful, they're trying to abide by rule of law, So in the early days of the investigation, you saw originally several people at lower levels being retained and questioned, people who were Zhou Yongkang's subordinates at one time or another in one of various positions that he had held. And there were quite a few of his former subordinates. And some of them ultimately testified against him, including the former head of SASAC—which is the commission that controls all state-owned assets—who also used to be also head of the largest oil company. The bribe was not an enormous amount, but a bribe nonetheless. So you build a case. That's the way it works anyplace, including the U.S.—you go after the smaller guys first, you get them, and you offer them a lighter sentence if they'll testify against the big boss. It's a very natural procedure.

HOST: And he's the most senior politician to face corruption charges. Are we likely to see many more of the really big names involved in this?

RLK: That's a question asked at many lunches and dinners among certain class in China. My guess is that while the Party's anti-corruption campaign, under President Xi, will continue for the good of the country, we may not see many more of the 'big names'. China has some major issues to tackle, particularly reform, and I think reform in the economy is the major initiative that President Xi Jinping will be focusing on. [Here's what's especially interesting at this time. The Communist Party of China, the CPC, the ruling party of China, really wants to come out to the world and explain how its system is working. The CPC wants the world appreciate that its leaderships is not the dictatorship, authoritarian, totalitarian system that many people think it is. It's not a Western multi-party democracy, obviously, but the Chinese have their own system, led by the CPC, which has produced China's miracle of economic development. For example, the Communist Party, the CPC, just published a series of five books in English explaining how the party works.](#)



You know, you can argue with the CPC, you can disagree with the CPC, but at least it's a very good step forward that China and the CPC wants to be more open to the world. The CPC's anti-corruption campaign is a case in point - which is described in detail in one of the CPC books. This is all part of this overall policy of real change and reform under President Xi Jinping.

HOST: Are we to see that, though, as a political promise or a real culture change against corruption in China?

RLK: That's a really a good question, and I've said, to be frank, there are four motivations in varying degrees that the anti-corruption campaign has. I like to start with the third. The third is that the individual—[Zhou Yongkang in this case]—is really guilty—so never feel sorry for him because he's really, really guilty. But the first is that there are these vested interests that inhibit needed reform, and by attacking some of the people who are corrupt, it breaks up the vested interests that inhibit reform. And that's really important in China. Then there's political motivation. These people may have had certain plans or thinking opposed to the central leadership of the Party, inappropriately so. And then the fourth motivation for the anti-corruption campaign is exactly what you're saying—President Xi Jinping has a grand vision of really changing the culture in China.

Now this won't happen overnight, because corruption is really embedded within Chinese society. And some of it is quite natural, because people trust each other, there's *guanxi*, and people exchange gifts and show respect. And such social customs, with the dramatic creation of wealth—particularly in the last ten, fifteen years, probably the greatest creation of wealth in the history of the world—with a one-party leadership system and without a fully free media, breeds corruption as a natural way of doing business. And certainly in many industries, from real estate to healthcare, everything is undergirded by this kind of culture that we would call corrupt—maybe China has a narrower definition, but still it is still tremendously corrupt.

I believe that President Xi Jinping has a grand vision of changing that. And that's a generational challenge. A lofty one. I mean, President Xi has a grand vision of what he thinks China's civilization should be: Xi is a great patriot, he thinks China should be one of the great nations of the world and he appreciates China's great civilization of 5000 years. And corruption is a scourge on all it. And so Xi really believes in making change. But it certainly won't happen overnight. Now some people are concerned that too much of the anti-corruption campaign could undermine the confidence that the masses have in the stability of the system. So I think they will be careful about it, but I do believe that President Xi has a grand vision of changing this kind of culture of corruption in China.