

FOUR SATIRICAL SHORT STORIES

BY ZENG RENQUAN

The Peerless Pearl

Party Secretary Hou of C County suddenly fell ill upon returning from an “Upright Public Servant” award ceremony in the provincial capital. His ailment was very strange: he was completely constipated. His wife, Bian Chunhua, attempted a variety of ways to help him, but all to no avail. For an entire week, his stomach could take food in, but nothing came out. By the eighth day it was difficult for the Party secretary to take in so much as a drop of water, and his round, fat face began to take on a haggard look, while his portly belly grew bigger than ever. Deeply alarmed, Bian Chunhua gathered up her children and ordered the driver to deliver her husband to the hospital for treatment.

While en route to the hospital, they received a concerned telephone call from County Chairman Mie, who had just heard the news of Hou’s illness. Grasping her cell phone, Bian Chunhua said anxiously, “Lao Hou is overtired and he eats so irregularly because of his work, it has induced an intestinal disorder.”

Chairman Mie said, “Party Secretary Hou has always worked without considering his need for rest, and is never getting enough to eat; it’s no wonder he’s become ill.”

The Chairman then offered to personally telephone Hospital Director Li and order him to prepare his best remedies in order to ensure that Party Secretary Hou’s speedy recovery.

Upon their arrival at the county hospital, Director Li flew out to receive them and arranged for Party Secretary Hou to stay in the VIP ward. He personally took Hou’s temperature and listened to his pulse and heartbeat, but as all were normal, there was nothing he could do but administer an injection and some laxatives.

Another day and night passed with no bowel movement, and Party Secretary Hou issued a series of groans that greatly alarmed his family and Director Li. Director Li gathered together the hospital’s top specialists and consultants in gastroenterology and urology. Finally a CT scan revealed that a spherical metallic object was blocking the party secretary’s anus, and his pelvis was not allowing it to pass from his body. Several experienced surgeons attempted to extract the object, but their repeated attempts were unsuccessful, yielding nothing but ever louder cries from Party Secretary Hou as his eyes rolled back in agony.

The news of Party Secretary Hou’s admittance to the hospital soon circulated widely. He was soon receiving condolences from County Chairman Mie and County Deputy Party Secretary Zhao, Deputy Party Secretary Qian, Deputy Party Secretary Sun, Deputy Party Secretary Li, County Deputy Chairman Wu, Deputy Chairman Zheng, Deputy Chairman Wang, Deputy Chairman Feng and Deputy Chairman Chen. These were soon followed by visits from the heads of all major departments and committees, then by a swarm of managing directors, general managers and factory managers. All of these were escorted in and out by Bian Chunhua as she repeated, “Lao Hou has been working too hard and eating too irregularly; it has depleted his strength and caused intestinal problems.” His visiting subordinates all looked deeply worried and expressed their concern and their worries over the health of their esteemed Party Secretary Hou; some even brought expensive gifts, which Bian Chunhua refused across the board. It wasn’t just that Lao Hou’s constipation could be cured only by laxatives and not by costly gifts, but that, as she sternly pointed out, “Lao Hou has been awarded repeatedly by the central government as a model of clean governance; you mustn’t ruin his reputation.” Only those with empty hands could enter the room to talk with Bian Chunhua, and what transpired after that is unknown.

On the fourth day, Director Li told Bian Chunhua that on the advice of the specialist hospital in the provincial capital, he had issued an invitation to a famous overseas gastroenterologist, who was now at that hospital giving a round of lectures and carrying out research. The director believed that he might be persuaded through *guanxi* and an attractive stipend to take a look at Party Secretary Hou. After urgent discussions, Director Li personally went to the provincial hospital and expeditiously arranged for the specialist, Professor George Bear, and his translator, Miss Mei, to visit the county hospital.

After carrying out a thorough examination and analyzing the results on his laptop computer, Professor Bear mumbled something that was translated as, “I’ve never seen such a strange illness.” Through Miss Mei, the professor told Director Li that the obstruction appeared to be a hardened ball of meat, and as the preliminary examination indicated, strangely

enough, it contained metallic elements. It was a very rare phenomenon, and surgery would be necessary.

Bian Chunhua and her children put their full faith in the specialist and asked him to perform the operation immediately. With the assistance of Director Li, Professor Bear extracted from Party Secretary Hou's bowels a hard meatball 20 centimeters in diameter. Professor Bear was intrigued by the meatball, and asked for permission to use it for medical research. Party Secretary Hou, whose temper had markedly improved following the clearing of his bowels, was extremely grateful to Professor Bear, and as the meatball had caused him nothing but suffering, he was happy to accede to the professor's request.

After three months, Party Secretary Hou had already forgotten about Professor Bear when suddenly one day, the professor, accompanied by Miss Mei, Hospital Director Li, County Chairman Mie and others, arrived at his home. Opening a custom-made box, Professor Bear unwrapped layer after layer of white cloth until he finally uncovered an exquisite, brilliantly gleaming pearl.

As Party Secretary Hou, Bian Chunhua and the others looked at him questioningly, Professor Bear said in stiff Chinese, "Don't you recognize it? It's your ballmeat."

Since he was not yet very fluent in Chinese, Professor Bear misspoke himself, and hearing the yelps of surprise from the others, he continued his explanation through Miss Mei: This pearl was a distillate of the universe, growing from the accumulated vapors of the world, and it would be very difficult for another such pearl to be produced in the space of hundreds of years. Textual research showed that such a pearl had previously developed in the bowels of the Roman emperor Theodosius. It was said that Theodosius was a notable gourmand who had consumed more than a thousand dragon hearts, phoenix livers, long-life fungus and other delicacies. This wondrous pearl, more precious than a diamond, became an object of desire for people all over the world, and was the main reason for the

conflict between Armenia and the Visigoths. After the fall of Rome the fate of the wondrous pearl became a mystery.¹ Although the pearl that grew in Party Secretary Hou was not the result of eating dragon hearts and phoenix livers, he had eaten countless turtles and other creatures winged and hoofed, as well as delicacies such as bear's paw, salamander, monkey's brain, pangolin, ginseng, long-life fungus and other myriad plant and animal life. The distillate of these delicacies had accumulated in his bowels and grown so large that when the time was ripe it had no way to emerge and became an obstruction. Fortunately it had been cut out, as it would have been lost forever if expelled in the toilet.

When Miss Mei had translated Professor Bear's words to this point, Party Secretary Hou and the others broke into peals of laughter. Professor Bear continued, "This pearl is more valuable than a gemstone and more rare than a diamond. Gold and platinum lose their luster next to it; it is a pearl of great price that has caused a great stir in my country. Several millionaires have already offered upwards of \$5 million for it." At this point Party Secretary Hou uttered a cry of surprise. Professor Bear continued, "I don't want to be the sole beneficiary of what you produced, so I came to ask for your opinion. If you agree with my view, I suggest that we go together to my country and auction it off. We should be able to get at least \$8 million for it. We can split the proceeds 30-70—you get 70 percent and I get 30 percent."

Aroused from their stupor of amazement, Party Secretary Hou and Bian Chunhua ran over and grabbed the pearl with great excitement. Placing the pearl to his lips for a kiss, Party Secretary Hou said, "With several million dollars, why should I bother serving as a county Party secretary any more!" But Bian Chunhua glared at him and said, "Forget it! You just keep working—after a few years you may well produce another!"

Translated by Stacy Mosher

A Change of Officials

After many years of effort, the sale of lumber and ore had brought prosperity to Lindou² Village in V Township, C County. However, local peasants had yet to benefit, and looked on helplessly as village officials spent vast amounts on feasting, drinking, entertaining and gift-giving.

The simple and honest farmers could endure the situation no longer, and a group of petitioners led by an old Communist Party member, Zhao Yulu, materialized among them. They started out by secretly writing an anonymous letter to the county and township municipal offices. This brought a group of investigators who examined the accounts, interviewed some villagers, then left without a word. The piggish village officials emerged unscathed and remained in office.

Zhao Yulu and the group of old Party members did not give up, and this time wrote a jointly signed open petition. The county government immediately sent the letter to the town-

ship, and another joint investigation committee made up of secretariat, procuratorate, audit, financial, industrial and commercial personnel hustled over and busied themselves with interviews and account audits for a while, then quietly disappeared. The piggish village officials remained firmly in place.

Zhao Yulu and the group of old Party members still could not believe justice was out of reach. Banding together, they rented a bus and chugged off to petition the county government. This drew the attention of some of the members of the County Party Secretariat, and the county party secretary personally sent down orders to the County Disciplinary Committee, which resulted in Secretary Ming of the County Disciplinary Committee personally leading a group of well-trained personnel to conduct an investigation. This time the investigators proved worthy of the great trust put in them by Zhao Yulu and the old Party members; not only did they dis-

cover abuses such as village officials feasting and drinking at public expense, as well as corruption and squandering of public funds, but also revealed their bribery of the previous investigatory committees. Those piggish village officials were handed over to the Justice Department for legal processing, and Secretary Ming carefully selected a small group of promising, experienced young people to take over the vacated village posts.

At the village meeting, Secretary Ming started off by bitterly denouncing the crimes of the previous village leaders, then called the newly promoted village officials to the stage. As the slim young officials walked jubilantly onto the stage, Secretary Ming excitedly introduced each of them to the farmers. He was moved to see the eyes of Zhao Yulu and the others brimming with tears, with some of the old Party members even weeping

audibly. Secretary Ming walked down from the stage and grasped their hands, saying, "Thank you, old Party members, for all you did for our village and our county. Those worms will receive the punishment they deserve, while these young and promising village officials will resolutely lead you all on the road to prosperity. I can well understand your excitement . . ."

Zhao Yulu wiped his tears and said, "What we're crying about is that . . . it took us years to fatten up that other bunch of officials. Now you've brought us these bags of skin and bones, and we don't know how long it will take to fatten them up!"

Secretary Ming's mouth gaped open in befuddlement. For some time he was unable to utter a word.

Translated by Akiko Kageyama

Sage Selection

W City was a county seat. In recent years, a number of officials from the municipal government and Party secretariat had endeavored to promote the city's economic development by traveling to the national and provincial capitals, recommending projects and soliciting funds. But the results were disappointing, and the officials looked on helplessly as neighboring counties and cities returned from the capital with big projects and sizable funding.

A new group of policy makers from in the municipal government and Party secretariat looked into the matter and determined that the failure to obtain projects and funds was attributable to the lack of an "activist" organization and competent manpower to engage with the upper levels. Following further research, the municipal standing committee decided to establish a "Public Relations Office," or "PR Bureau." In order to avoid increasing staff and operational overheads, they decided that the PR Bureau would be established from the existing "Spiritual Values Office," or "Values Office," which had served no practical purpose in the years of its existence, and which had recently been caught up in a "financial issue." However, the head of the PR Bureau would be an important posting, requiring someone well-spoken, able and moral. After further research, Assistant Mayor Yang was appointed to lead an assessment group to the Values Office to personally examine the candidates.

This assignment put Assistant Mayor Yang in a quandary. Selecting the head of the PR Bureau from among candidates city-wide would be a cinch, but choosing the head from among existing staff of the "Values Office" was like promoting a general from a pool of dwarfs. Assistant Mayor Yang began his assessment according to the rules and regulations handed down from above.

The first rule used in recent years to appoint officials included important criteria such as "moral integrity, ability, education and discipline." There were also strict rules on such quantitative criteria as official status, Party membership, age, class, educational background and previous positions, as well as excellence in morals, diligence and ability. The "Values

Office" had 25 staff in a structure of one chief, two deputies, three directors and four administrators. But there were only 13 cadres among them, and only nine of these were Party members, so in effect there were only nine candidates for the head of the PR Bureau, and three or four of these had been involved in the problematic financial issue.

Director Ding Yi had been suspected of involvement in a corruption and bribery case involving a 100,000 yuan, and following official interrogation by the Municipal Disciplinary Committee had forfeited a 100,000 yuan. During the interrogation period he had feigned insanity, and the Municipal Disciplinary Committee had handed the case over to the Justice Department for processing. Such a person naturally could not be appointed.

Deputy Director Chen Er was already over 48 years old, so did not meet the age criterion for official selection. The other deputy director, Zhang San, although satisfying the criteria, had also been investigated by the Municipal Disciplinary Committee over the financial issue. During the interrogation he had "spilled his guts," and as he had confessed his error, exposed the involvement of others and voluntarily forfeited his ill-gotten gains, his case was not handed over to the Justice Department. After further consideration, Assistant Mayor Yang decided to keep him as a candidate and set his file aside. Li Si, a soldier-turned-official, was straight and honest, and had demonstrated working ability, but it had been he who had exposed the Values Office's financial issue. Assistant Mayor Yang picked him as one of the candidates.

Wang Wu did not have a college degree, and therefore failed to satisfy the essential "education" criterion. Liu Liu was an intellectual: he had an undergraduate degree in Chinese literature from a respectable university, was only 32 years of age and expressed himself well. While rumor had it that he had helped Zhang San write the report on the financial problems at the Values Office, Assistant Mayor Yang included him as a candidate as a matter of course, and put his file aside.

Yang Qi was blind in one eye and afflicted with a stammer.

Deputy Mayor Yang pushed his file aside even before he finished reading it. Liu Ba had been appointed to her position fresh out of college, and was now on maternity leave, so she could not be considered a candidate. Xiang Jiu, although fulfilling all of the criteria, had been under the Municipal Disciplinary Committee's examination for two months, during which time he had not spoken a single word. Since he refused to say anything, the Municipal Disciplinary Committee could not obtain testimony, and not knowing what else to do, they finally released him. As Assistant Mayor Yang paged through Xiang Jiu's file, a smile flickered across his face. Finally, Assistant Mayor Yang decided on Zhang San, Li Si, Liu Liu, and Xiang Jiu as candidates for the post.

"Which of these four do you think is suitable for bureau head?" Assistant Mayor Yang asked his comrades in the assessment group.

"Both Li Si and Liu Liu had the courage to expose the problems in the bureau leadership, so I think they are the kind of reform-minded persons who should be appointed to the position," said Assistant Secretary Shi of the Municipal Disciplinary Committee. "Although Zhang San came clean during the interrogation, he clearly has a problematic history. Although Xiang Jiu never admitted anything, he's like a stone in a latrine, both hard and smelly. I wouldn't feel comfortable with him."

"I agree," said Assistant Director Zeng of the Organization Department. "Liu Liu is literate and well-spoken, and has the courage of his convictions. He is also a graduate of a respectable university. The others have only correspondence degrees at best. Liu Liu fulfills the selection criteria best."

Ill-disposed Scraps

When Director Qu retired from his position as the director of the Farming and Livestock Bureau, his colleagues and associates were all very reluctant to part with him. Even some higher-ranking officials were loath to see him go. Qu was known among junior and senior officials alike as a frugal, honest, humble and polite man. Moreover, since the Bureau of Farming and Livestock had an uncorrupted image, all his colleagues held him in particularly high regard.

Throughout his decades at the Bureau of Farming and Livestock—from his early days as a deputy chief through his tenure as director—the strongest impression he made was through his clothes: a shabby, stained tunic suit, revolutionary-era shoes, and a decades-old cotton army jacket networked with patches. His bicycle, which he had used daily over the decades, was of a style rarely seen in the 21st century.

At a farewell party held by Director Feng of the Farming and Manufacturing Department and County Deputy Director Ding, who co-managed the Farming and Livestock Bureau, Director Feng opened a package and said, "Old Qu, we directors bought you a suit, a pair of leather shoes and a tie. Starting tomorrow, you are no longer allowed to wear those shabby clothes. We're already living in the 21st century, yet you continue to dress like a common laborer."

"I have a different opinion," said the deputy municipal party secretary. "Zhang San had the courage to admit his own error. He also voluntarily exposed the director's involvement, and told the whole story. This shows he is open and above-board. We should appoint him to the key position."

"Are there any other views?" asked Assistant Mayor Yang.

"My opinion is completely opposite of everyone else's," said Assistant Director Chen of the Organization Department. "One of the main purposes of the PR Bureau is to engage with the upper levels. When traveling to the capital and recommending projects or soliciting funding, the head of the PR Bureau not only needs a smooth tongue, but has to be able to protect the confidentiality of the engagement activities. Could we trust loose-tongued people such as Li Si or Liu Liu in such a capacity? Could they keep a lid on the activities carried out at various levels? Xiang Jiu has demonstrated that he has a tight lip and won't blab even under pressure. I think this kind of person is most reliable."

"Great minds think alike," cried Assistant Mayor Yang excitedly with a slap on his leg. "This man is a real find!"

Several days later, the Values Department received the Municipal Committee's paperwork on its dissolution and conversion into the Public Relations Office, as well as the Organization Department's official appointment of Xiang Jiu as head of the PR Bureau.

Translated by Akiko Kageyama

Director Qu responded with a forced smile, "I've been wearing decades of revolutionary activity. I would feel awkward if I changed my clothes now."

"Old Qu, you've worked hard and lived simply for decades, wholeheartedly serving the public. Now that you're retiring, you ought to change your image," County Deputy Director Ding said earnestly. "That old bicycle of yours belongs in a museum, too. We've bought you a new one."

"This . . . wouldn't this be like abandoning the real me?" Director Qu said perplexedly, with a troubled expression on his face.

The next day, Director Qu was invited to another farewell party. This one was hosted by the current deputy director of the Farming and Livestock Bureau, whom Qu had trained himself. In preparation for the event, Director Qu changed from his faded tunic suit and patched-up cotton jacket into the new clothes presented to him by the directors. Sure enough, he looked radiant and appeared to be a different person altogether. Director Gui, his successor, was amazed by the transformation and said, "Your old subordinates also bought you a brand new suit to wear. We never guessed you'd change out of those threadbare clothes for the occasion."

"Do you think I would have done this myself?" said Direc-

tor Qu miserably. “These clothes were given to me by Director Feng and the other directors. I was engaged in revolutionary activities for decades, and wore those old clothes every day. But now that I’m retiring it seems you can’t stand the way I look! Even my old wife wants to change me. As soon as I returned home last night, she tossed aside my old clothes and laid out these new ones.”

“You shouldn’t throw away that old tunic and cotton jacket,” said Deputy Bureau Director Hua, only half joking. “Someday a museum might want to display them as historical relics to promote revolutionary education. Since the Provincial Committee has recognized you as a model Party member and an untainted bureau director, your reputation should be maintained and promoted throughout the ages!”

“Everything has changed overnight,” said Director Qu disapprovingly. “When I die and see Marx or Chairman Mao, I won’t know what to say to them!”

In accordance with custom, Qu’s subordinates paid their respects through toasts at the party. As a result, Director Qu was feeling quite woozy by the time he reached home. His wife quickly poured him some tea to sober him up, and was delighted to find that he’d been presented with more new clothes. When he regained his wits, Director Qu found that his room had been tidied up, and that his tatty old clothes, shoes and hat were all gone. He cried out in alarm, “Wife, where are my old clothes and books?”

“You’re retired now, why would you still wear those shabby clothes? It’s not as if we have no money.” The uneducated wife continued proudly, “As soon as you left in the afternoon, I called a scrap collector and disposed of those old things. I got more than 20 yuan for them!”

“Did you get rid of that old cotton jacket, too?” asked Director Qu in a trembling voice, now completely sober.

“Of course! What use would that be now?!” said his wife with a self-satisfied air. “But I saved your certificates and awards.”

“It’s all over . . .” said Director Qu, dropping to the floor. “Hundreds of thousands of yuan have vanished . . .”

“What hundreds of thousands of yuan?” asked the wife, confused.

“In that cotton jacket, I had more than two hundred thousand yuan,” Director Qu said weakly.

“Didn’t you always hand me your entire salary? How could you possibly have two hundred thousand yuan?” asked the wife, smiling with disbelief. “You drank too much. You’re talking nonsense.”

“I’m completely sober,” Director Qu said faintly. “That jacket held all the advantages I collected over the years and the proceeds of over-reported expenses. Altogether there was more than two hundred thousand yuan. I couldn’t leave it at home since I didn’t want it stolen by thieves, and I couldn’t deposit it in a bank because the money came from dubious sources. The only safe place was my old cotton jacket.”

His wife asked doubtfully, “You’re famous for your incorruptability. Who gave you two hundred thousand yuan?”

“What do you understand? A carriage goes straight while the horses run askew; a dilapidated temple houses a prosperous monk. Don’t you understand this logic?!” Director Qu demanded, agitated and tearful. “My shabby clothes established the image of a clean and humble civil servant . . . it’s all over, in an instant. Heavens, why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

Pounding her chest and stamping her feet in vexation, his wife declared, “You were clever all your life, but just this one moment of stupidity. . .”

Translated by Akiko Kageyama

These stories were originally posted in Chinese on the Peacehall Web site:

http://www.boxun.com/hero/zengrenquan/57_1.shtml

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1. This tale may be related to a comment in Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “An ambassador from the emperor Zeno accompanied the rash and unfortunate Perozes, in his expedition against the Nephthalites, or white Huns, whose conquests had been stretched from the Caspian to the heart of India, whose throne was enriched with emeralds, and whose cavalry was supported by a line of two thousand elephants . . . In this war the Huns got, or at least Perozes lost, the finest pearl in the world, of which Procopius relates a ridiculous fable.” (Part 5 and Footnote 133). Another source quotes Procopius as relating that Perozes, “In the very moment of falling into the pit into which he had been entrapped by the feigned retreat of the Huns, tore from his right ear his great pearl, the glory of his realm, and cast it before himself into the abyss, there to be eternally lost amidst the hideous chaos of crushed men and horses.”
2. Literally, Phosphorous Town.