

A Greedy and Cruel Man, Regarding Money More Important than Life

On Yang Hong, a Constable in “*Zhang Tingxiu Escapes to Save His Father*”

Zhenghui Deng

Public Art Teaching Department
Huanghe Science and Technology College
Zhengzhou, China 450046

Abstract—Yang Hong is a constable in the novel of the *Stories to Awaken Men, Zhang Tingxiu Escapes to Save His Father*. He is cunning, greedy, and good at guessing what others think and framing civilians as well as spouting lies, one of the most representative yamen runners in “San Yan”. What are the reasons behind these evil behaviors made by yamen runners represented by Yang Hong? It has great relationship with the fact that in Ming dynasty, the yamen runners have low social status and no opportunity to get promoted, use the power entitled by feudal government to make their fortune and their power do not get effective supervision.

Keywords—*Stories to Awaken Men; Yang Hong; greedy and cruel; reasons*

I. INTRODUCTION

Feng Menglong in Ming dynasty describes many roles of yamen runner in his novel “San Yan” (*Stories to Enlighten Men, Stories to Warn Men, Stories to Awaken Men*). The so-called yamen runner is included in the profession of “beadle”. “Beadle is a yamen runner that the feudal government orders about, responsible for urging and imposing land tax, keeping the peace, guarding checkpoint and storehouse, watching and arresting prisoners, lining up on the law court, guarding the entrance, subpoenaing, transferring documents and escorting items of feudal government, etc.” [1] P358 In short, constables, doormen, prison guards, postrider all belong to roles of yamen runners. “San Yan” just skates over some of these roles and calls them yamen runners. In some sections, it describes names and behaviors of these yamen runners in detail and displays their characteristics. “*Zhang Tingxiu Escapes to Save His Father*”, a section in *Stories to Awaken Men*, describes images and behaviors of yamen runners represented by Yang Hong. This kind of description not only extrudes the greed and viciousness of Yang Hong, etc, but also displays the greed and cruelty of prison guards.

II. ANALYSIS ON PERSONAL CHARACTER AND BEHAVIORS OF CONSTABLE YANG HONG IN “ZHANG TINGXIU ESCAPES TO SAVE HIS FATHER”

In “*Zhang Tingxiu Escapes to Save His Father*”, the constable Yang Hong is a crucial person. From the perspective of story development, he not only helps Zhao Ang to frame Zhang Quan and his sons, but also constantly extorts Zhao Ang. He is the key witness to acknowledge Zhao Ang’s guilt. From the perspective of personal character, just as other constables and yamen runners, he is greedy, cunning, ruthless and evil, a complete villain.

When Zhao Ang just asks something about Yang Hong, an old yamen runner calls Yang Hong the “Yang Heixin”. From this we can know Yang Hong is notorious in daily life and insiders are quite familiar with him. When Zhao Ang sees Yang Hong and says that he needs some help. Yang Hong says to Zhao Ang, “what’s the matter? Just say in here.” Since Yang Hong and Zhao Ang are classmates in childhood, they should be close when they meet each other. But Yang Hong seems to be very cold and has no enthusiasm that appears in the situation that acquaintances meet each other after a long time. After getting 50 taels of silver, Yang Hong discusses with Zhao Ang about how to plot to murder Zhang Quan. When Zhao Ang reaffirms his request, Yang Hong says, “We know each other very well from childhood, please do not say holiday words!” His attitude is different, as if he were not the same person. The reason is obvious: the 50 taels of silver plays a decisive role and is the root that Yang Hong totally changes his attitude. Just as in *Jin Lingshi Uses Beautiful Maidservants to Recompense Catamite*, a yamen runner shouts, “fight for frame and money, regardless of friends and ties of friendship!” [2] P183 It seems that they are born for money. In order to get money, they think friends are not worth mentioning.

In the novel, isn’t there any scruple when Yang Hong accepts the silver to plot to murder Zhang Quan and his two sons? The answer is no. When Zhao Ang entreats him to defeat Zhang Quan, the personal enemy, Yang Hong firstly asks the name, his family and whether there is any person who helps him to engage in a lawsuit. Before making decisions, he has to make it clear that what kind of person

Zhao Ang's personal enemy is and whether he has strong power and background. When Zhao Ang says Zhang Quan is just a small business owner from other place and has no strong background and his sons are still young, Yang Hong joyfully promises and actively comes up with new and better ways to help Zhao Ang to plot to murder Zhang Quan. If Zhao Ang's personal enemy has stronger background, distinguished family and wide connections with people, maybe Yang Hong won't accept the bribe to plot to murder Zhang Quan. But when he knows Zhang Quan, an ordinary people, is just a business owner without background and foundation from other place, it is easier for him to frame Zhang Quan.

Yang Hong is an old constable and has high degree of proficiency in how to frame others. When Zhao Ang says, "I have a personal enemy; please dispatch a bandit to kill him to remove my resentment" and takes out a bag of 50 taels of silver, Yang Hong hurriedly says, "store the money away first. It isn't convenient and appropriate if other people see it." Zhao Ang wraps up and put it beside them. Yang Hong says, "How does your personal enemy look like? What's his name? How is his family? If I arrest him, does he have any relative who will stand out and file a suit for him?" Yang Hong "hurriedly say" indicates that he immediately wants to occupy the money, but he has scruples because if someone sees this scene, it will cause troubles for him. So he asks Zhao Ang to store the money away before discussion. Then he asks who Zhao Ang's personal enemy is, what family property does this person have and whether it will cause big troubles if he arrests him. Those words said by Yang Hong show that he wants to know more about Zhao Ang's personal enemy, sees whether this person is easy to deal with and whether it will leave some unnecessary troubles. When Zhao Ang introduces that Zhang Quan is just a common business owner from other place and has no strong background but two little sons, Yang Hong says, "It doesn't matter!... I guarantee to sentence him to death. At that time, it is very easy to kill him in the prison." [3] P409 Yang Hong clearly explains how to doom Zhang Quan to death in a few words and relaxed tone. His greed, evil and cruelty stand vividly revealed on the paper.

Yang Hong is an old constable who has worked for a long time, good at guess what others think and uses lies to cheat. After accepting the bribe from Zhao Ang, Yang Hong goes back home and prepares wine, meat and meal then goes to the dungeon to visit the five bandits. At first he wins their favors by speaking sugared words, and then he provides the food for them, and asks them, "Have you ever stolen things from Zhang Quan, the carpenter who opens a cloth store outside Chang Men?" All of them say, "Never." Yang Hong says, "Since you haven't, why he know what you have done and send people to warn to kill you as soon as possible? All of you think about whether there is any rancor." Yang Hong firstly sets the premise that Zhang Quan wants to frame these bandits. Why does Zhang Quan want to kill these bandits as soon as possible? Without saying his own intention, he asks the bandits to think about how they become enemies with Zhang Quan and deliberately makes them subjectively think Zhang Quan has done this. At last, a bandit thinks of a thing

that he abused Zhang Quan because he waited for a long time when he bought cloth. Yang Hong says, "This is just a small matter, why does he want to kill many people's lives? He is so cruel!" Yang Hong affirms this reason first and intentionally says this is just a small matter and why Zhang Quan wants to kill their lives. But suddenly he changes to say that Zhang Quan is so cruel. In this way, it causes the resentments of those bandits for Zhang Quan. They hate Zhang Quan's guts and immediately vow to revenge. To achieve the goal of framing Zhang Quan, Yang Hong seizes the opportunity and asks bandits to "disclose" that Zhang Quan is the criminal companion. If Yang Hong firstly asks the bandits to frame Zhang Quan, these bandits may be reluctant and it will leave evidences for his crime of bending the law. So he uses this enticing and cheating way to make bandits believe what he says. Yang Hong's viciousness and scheming are showed incisively and vividly.

The fact that Yang Hong is good at guessing what others think also shows in his blackmail for Zhao Ang after the event. After Zhao Ang bribes Yang Hong to frame Zhang Quan who is thrown into jail, and throw Zhang Tingxiu and Zhang Wenxiu into the river, he thinks everything is over. Yang Hong knows he catches Zhao Ang tripping, so he blackmails Zhao Ang by repeatedly calling at his house.

Zhao Ang is satisfied about everything. But one thing makes him nervous. What's it? It's the thing about Yang Hong. Because cooperating with him in two big things, Yang Hong blackmails him every now and then. At first, Zhao Ang gives Yang Hong the money that he demands. But later, he is fed up with Yang Hong but it is difficult to refuse him. When he gives money to Yang Hong, Yang Hong thinks the money is not enough and he wants more. There are two or three times when Zhao Ang doesn't meet Yang Hong's demands. Because of this, Yang Hong holds the grudge and is discontented and speaks resentfully. Zhao Ang fears that someone may give away this information and let his wife's father know, so he submits to humiliation to present the money to Yang Hong according to his demands. Seeing his fear, Yang Hong continues to blackmail more frequently. [4] P433

It can be seen from the above passage that Yang Hong blackmails Zhao Ang repeatedly and know Zhao Ang's secrets, so Zhao Ang doesn't dare to refuse Yang Hong. Each time when he gives Yang Hong the money, Yang Hong doesn't satisfies and "thinks the money is not enough and he wants more". It brings Zhao Ang a secret trouble after he frames Zhang Quan and his sons.

Yang Hong also has "excellent" performance when he arrests Zhang Quan. After he catches Zhang Quan, other constables all go to Zhang Quan's dwelling behind the store. He fears that others take all the valuable things, so he hurries to the dwelling, too. After "plundering all the jewelry, expensive clothing and other valuables and slipping away with other constables", he packs articles such as the remaining cloth and takes away as stolen goods. This behavior is exactly the same as the plot in *He Daqing Makes Yuan Yang Di Eternal Regret* that constables pick up much money on the sly in Feikong nunnery. When Yang Hong

involves in making an inventory of the criminal's possessions and confiscating them, the behavior that he forcibly occupies and loots the property stands vividly revealed on the paper.

It's obvious to see Yang Hong is mean and can be called the "model" of ruthlessness. After Yang Jiang, the younger brother of Yang Hong, and his helpers make Zhang Tingxiu and Zhang Wenxiu drunk, tie them up and throw them into the river, and come back, Zhao Ang give them 30 taels of silver, Yang Hong thinks the money is not enough, argues with Zhao Ang and "become red in the face". When Yang Hong and other constables arrest Zhang Quan, Yang Hong blackmails Zhao Ang; and after they come back yamen, Yang Hong still extorts Zhao Ang. When Zhang Wenxiu recognizes Yang Jiang and takes them to the home of squire Wang, Yang Hong doesn't know the details and thinks Zhao Ang instigates others to attack him. He scolds immediately, "An ungrateful bastard! I have plotted many great things with you; do you want to attack me in reverse?" After Yang Hong knows that this thing is uncovered, "think the money sent by Zhao Ang in ordinary days, and Zhao Ang isn't brisk and neat, how he can let off Zhao Ang! So he says, 'I haven't done that lousy thing. Zhao Ang hates him, so he entreats me to plot to murder you and your sons.' "He makes a confession of Zhao Ang's crime immediately and suddenly turns hostile.

III. ANALYSIS ON CHARACTERS SIMILAR TO CONSTABLE YANG HONG IN "ZHANG TINGXIU ESCAPES TO SAVE HIS FATHER"

Except for Yang Hong, there are other characters similar to Yang Hong in this novel. After Zhang Quan is thrown into prison, Zhang Tingxiu entreats prison guards to keep an eye on his father and he will pay them back. A prison guard says:

Sir, as the saying goes: one has to make use of whatever resources available. For us, it's better to give ready money than oral promise. We are not concerned about whether you are treated unjustly or not at all and we don't want oral promise. If you have money, just give some to us today. We will do what you want us to do; if you don't have money, that's fine. No one will dun. We won't wait for you to thank us later. [5] P414

As the saying goes, the door of yamen faces the south since ancient times; you cannot be treated justly if you don't have money but justification. The prison guard shows ruthlessness in his words, which have a meaning beyond the mere words: I make a living by extorting prisoners. It has nothing to do with me that whether you are treated unjustly or not. If you give me some money, I will kindly accept and do as more as I can to help you; if you don't give me the money, I will not force you. But I cannot make sure I will treat the prisoner well. I know your "oral promise" is empty talk. I want ready money now. Just prepare it for me hurriedly and stop bullshitting. In a word, don't you have any money?! Just wait and I will torture your father as far as I can!

Zhang Tingxiu gets scared and says hurriedly, "Today I haven't prepared the money. I will give you tomorrow morning." After getting this definite answer, the prison guard says reluctantly, "in this case, please go back home and don't worry about it. We will pay attention to it." When Zhang Tingxiu borrows 10 taels of silver and takes out 2 taels of silver to bribe the prison guard. He thinks the money is not enough so Zhang Tingxiu adds one taels of silver. Only in this way will he lets Zhang Tingxiu and his brother visit their father. The behavior and attitude of the prison guard described in the novel have close relationship with "money". For these prison guards, if someone bribes them, they will regard him as people that they rely on for a living; if someone doesn't bribe them, they will look him as a stranger and turn their backs on him.

IV. REASONS WHY RASCALITY APPEARED AMONG YAMEN RUNNERS IN MING DYNASTY

There is no doubt that Yang Hong and prison guards are detestable. They commit all manners of crimes, such as bend the law for personal gain, accept bribes, intend to despoil others property and murder other people. But only on the basis on these, we cannot say the nature of these people is bad and they are born to be bad. "Once a good child becomes yamen runner, there are few people who won't oppress common people" [1] P359, these two sentences not only show that most yamen runners have rascality, but also reveal that they are "good people". Therefore, how do those people like Yang Hong fall into the ranks of the wicked? What are the reasons behind their disgusting conducts?

Firstly, yamen runners have low social status and there is no opportunity for them to get promoted. In Ming dynasty, "although there is a set of promotion system for beadies, the old habit that people look down upon beadies like in Tang and Song dynasties has resumed. It is very difficult for those beadies to become dignitaries and feudal government generally looks down upon those beadies. It's almost impossible for them to get promoted and people don't think highly of them". [1] P358 The law of Ming dynasty also restricts that "low-down beadies" and their descendants within three generations are not allowed to take imperial competitive examination or become an official. These people are called "prostitute, actors and actresses, yamen runner and prison guard", who don't rank among the list of "musician household" in feudal government. In reality, it also includes constable, doorman, executioner and post-mortem examiner, etc. This kind of stipulation ruins hopes of yamen runners and prison guards for getting promoted. In Shen Xiaoxia Meets Memorial on Going to War, after Zhang Qian and Li Wan who escort Shen Xiaoxia and his concubine lose the prisoners, the local government lashes Zhang Qian and Li Wan every now and then and they are almost cornered. To some extent, it shows the contempt of those government officials for yamen runners. At the doorway of squire Wang, when Yang Hong and his colleague see Zhang Wenxiu wear robe to enter squire Wang's home, two of them "stand up hurriedly", which show these yamen runners have low political status. They have low social status and feudal government looks down upon them, so "government officials

always scold them. Once they are incompetence in handling affairs, except for abuse, they are always flogged or wielded with big stick. After they suffer beating, they must kneel down, offer an apology and express gratitude to pretend to be culpable of punishment and feel too ashamed to show their faces.” [1] P359

Secondly, they can make their fortune by making use of power entitled by feudal government. The salary of yamen runners in Ming dynasty is equivalent to the income of common people at that time. In the middle of Wanli years, the average annual salary of 91 beadles and yamen runners in the Court of Censors in Nanjing is only 7.74 taels of silver. [4] P35 Even though it's just an income statistics of beadles and yamen runners of a department, there is no big difference in other departments. Generally, the annual income of a craftsman is about 10.8 taels of silver [4] P34. In *the Peddler and the Beauty*, the annual income of Qin Zhong who sells the oil is 16 taels of silver. This shows that the wage income level of yamen runners is lower intermediate. Nevertheless, in reality, many people want to get this job and the competition is fierce in Ming dynasty. They make great efforts to rank among the list of it through ways of being introduced by their acquaintance and bribing government officials. What are the benefits to become yamen runners? In short, they accumulate wealth by unfair means and use the power entitled by government officials to make their family's fortune. In this novel, first of all, Zhao Ang bribes Yang Hong by paying 50 taels of silver in advance. After Yang Hong is succeed in framing Zhang Quan, he pays 50 taels of silver. After offering advice to throw Zhang Tingxiu and his brother and drown them, Yang Hong gets 60 taels of silver. Later, Yang Hong does two big things for Zhao Ang and frequently extorts Zhao Ang. Because Yang Hong knows Zhao Ang's secrets, Zhao Ang has to give the money. When Yang Hong and his colleagues make an inventory of Zhang Quan's possessions and confiscate them, he loots some money and properties. It clearly writes that Yang Hong has get 110 taels of silver. Together with the money that isn't recorded, the money obtained by Yang Hong is about 200 taels of silver. In Ming dynasty, 1 tael of silver is about equal to RMB 660.8 yuan [5] P58. Through conversion, in the law case about Zhang Quan and his sons, Yang Hong gets 132,160 yuan, which is more than a dozen times of Yang Hong's annual salary. His annual income will be amazing if he involves in other law cases. In the novel, the “tip” that the prison guard extorts Zhang Tingxiu is 3 taels of silver in one time. If he guards five prisoners, his annual income is substantial. Because power application can bring them tremendous earnings, these yamen runners can “work in the government and become rich person, look for field and buy houses and order about slaves and maid-servants”. [4] P40 The speed of making a fortune is much faster than making money by engaging in business and agriculture. Therefore, the black income or gray income becomes strong evidences that they crazily accumulate wealth by unfair means.

Thirdly, the primary cause is that the system design is flawed and public power doesn't get effective supervision. From the perspective of us, it is the primary cause that makes Yang Hong and prison guards bend the law for personal gain.

Yang Hong and prison guards have the power of arrest, inquest, supervision and escort, etc. Just because they have this kind of power, they can dredge for continuous money from criminal suspects and prisoners. In the novel, Feng Menglong also says that it seems that government officials are incorruptible but they are corrupt in secret. Even though the systems and regulations have explicit stipulation to restrict power, in the process of executing power, deviations always exist. It is difficult to avoid deviation, and there aren't good methods to avoid it as far as possible. In the novel, for ordinary people, those constables especially like Yang Hong are more terrible than bandits and thieves, whose purposes are clear and single. Thieves go away after they steal things and bandits plunder money and take away women. But these odd-job men use their power to do whatever they want. When they conspire to frame ordinary people up, you have to bribe them and be obedient, put up with their reprimand, bondage, cruel beat and arbitrary trample. When the power runs in the dark, its evil will be magnified infinitely. The power that isn't under effective restrictions and supervision is a lingering nightmare forever for common people.

REFERENCES

- [1] Wrote by Wei Qingyuan, Bo Hua, History of Chinese Bureaucratic System, Shanghai: Orient Publishing Center, first edition in Sep. 2001
- [2] Wrote by Feng Menglong, checked and punctuated by Qiu Gu, Stories to Warn Men, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, first edition in Dec. 1996
- [3] Wrote by Feng Menglong, checked and punctuated by Tang Songbo, Stories to Awaken Men, Shield Press, first edition in Jan. 2004
- [4] Hu Tiejie, Change of Official Salary Constitution and Start of Equitable Corvee Law in Ming Dynasty. Journal of Historical Science, the 11th edition in 2012.
- [5] Liu Zhaoping. Salary, Commodity Price and Revenue in Ming Dynasty. Social Watch, the first edition in 2008.