

By Xiao Chi An\*

Wang Li embezzled 3,000 yuan (US\$439) when she worked for Blue Moon, a Guangzhou-based chemical company. Her husband, Hong Bo, says Guangzhou police detained her in her home in Xingtai, Hebei province, at the end of April 2009.

Hong, a man in his thirties, went to Guangzhou in early May to ask lawyer Li Sheng for advice. "You probably need to pay them 20,000 yuan (US\$2,929)," Li told Hong, referring to how much money Hong should pay to bribe the policeman in charge of his wife's case.

But things did not turn out quite as badly as Li predicted. When Hong invited the policeman who detained Wang to have dinner and "a talk," the policeman replied, "OK. Don't worry; your wife will be released if you return the money to the company. We will be in a better mood to have a meal after her release."

A week later, Wang was released, even though Hong had not repaid the embezzled funds. Hong, Wang, their friend Zhang Chong and three policemen sat together in a fancy restaurant and had a "very happy talk." After the meal, each of the three police officers was given ten packages of cigarettes as "small gifts of appreciation."

"I spent a total of 2,500 yuan (US\$366) tonight," Hong told Zhang. "These policemen are very nice men. It is true that Wang Li's wrongdoing is too minor for her to be jailed for, but if the police make trouble for me, I am afraid I will have to pay 20,000 yuan (US\$2,929), the amount that Li had said was required to save Wang Li."

"Don't you think the police were being corrupt by attending the dinner and taking the cigarettes?" Zhang asked. "Maybe," Hong said, "but look, this is China, a corrupt country. I would say they are very clean when compared to the police in my hometown." Hong added that a policeman in his home city, who helped Guangzhou police find Wang Li, had asked for a payment of 600 yuan (US\$88) before he would give Hong the Guangzhou police department's telephone number.

"So you can see, Guangzhou police are clean and I am lucky," Hong said. "Actually, I was prepared to pay 20,000 yuan (US\$2,929) to them but finally it came to only 2,500 yuan (US\$366)."

“Hong Bo *is* lucky,” says Qian Yun, a woman in her forties from Hunan province who works in Guangzhou as a nanny, after hearing the above story. “His wife did something wrong and he spent just 2,500 yuan (US\$366). But, you know, the police took more than 4,500 yuan (US\$659) from my cousin when he was only watching other people gamble. The police said they were raiding the gambling house and did not return the money to my cousin until he agreed that they could keep 3,000 yuan (US\$439). In fact, the police were not conducting a gambling raid at all. They were just grabbing money. Everybody knows that every police officer, every official, only cares about money, money, money!”

## Money: Today’s Religion

“Money, money and money — that is all the officials and government are about,” says Feng Gui, a staff member of the Shenzhen government. “There is no religion in today’s China; money is their religion.”

Feng argues that no social value system, political system or court system exists to restrain people’s greed. Everybody in China uses any chance they get to grab money. It is no surprise that so many officials, police officers and businessmen are corrupt: They have power without any checks or balances on it.

The Chinese government, which usually plays down “negative information” and plays up “good things,” does not deny the existence of corruption. Indeed, in a speech at a session of the National People’s Congress in March 2009, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao said: “Corruption remains a serious problem in some localities, departments and areas. We will resolutely investigate and prosecute corruption cases and punish corrupt people in accordance with the law.”

“But the prime minister doesn’t dare admit to corruption in the military,” says Ge Fei, a scholar in a military academy in Nanjing. Ge thinks the military is one the most corrupt areas. In fact, many people argue that corruption costs trillions of yuan every year.

“But that is just an estimate,” says Cheng Hao, a scholar from Tsinghua University. “The only thing we can be sure of is that the corruption is very serious.”

According to the report of China’s Supreme People’s Procuratorate, which was released in March 2009, a total of 2,687 Chinese officials above the county level were punished for corruption in 2008, including four ministers.

It does seem, though, that the anti-corruption movement in China was still strong in 2009. In April, Chen Shaoji, the previous head of police and the legal system of Guangdong province, was investigated and dismissed for corrupt activities. Two months later, Xu Zongheng, the mayor of Shenzhen city, fell for the same reason. Given their positions and the economic status of Guangdong and Shenzhen, the fall of these two officials was branded by the media as the “anti-corruption storm.” Many people see it as the sign of government’s determination to root out corruption.

## Politics as Usual Disguised as Anti-Corruption

“But the fact is that the fall of Chen and Xu is more the result of an internal political fight than the result of an anti-corruption campaign,” Feng Gui says. “Xu and his men are not the only corrupt officials in Shenzhen, and if someone really wants to get rid of the dirt here, almost no high-ranking official could avoid punishment. The higher-level government and central government knew very clearly, before the ‘anti-corruption storm,’ who should be punished and who should be protected. It is all about politics.”

Wang Hua, a county-level official in Anhui province, agrees. “The whole system is rotten. I don’t know who can save it. Maybe a violent revolution can,” he says. He also believes that he has to perform corrupt acts sometimes to “save face” and because of “family relationships or friendship.” Wang thinks the Communist Party is part of the problem, but that culture is also a reason. “We emphasize family and friendship too much. I sometimes think perhaps that only revolution can clean this society.”

Hong Ming, a professor at Shanghai Normal University, disagrees. “The problem of corruption in China is a problem of the political system, nothing else,” he says. “Under the one-party totalitarian system, no power is checked. Fallen high-ranking officials fell because they lost political fights. Few of them lost political fights because of their corrupt activities.”

Hong Ming argues that culture or tradition should not be the scapegoats when people talk about reasons for corruption. “Think about Singapore, Hong Kong or even Taiwan, all of which are Chinese societies and all of which are far less corrupt than mainland China. Why? Because they are democratic and the rule of law is respected.”

## What the Future Looks Like

According to the 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index released by Transparency International, of among 180 countries and areas that were surveyed, Singapore was the least corrupt of the Chinese cultures, ranking fourth. Hong Kong ranked No. 12, Taiwan ranked No. 39 and China ranked No. 72.

“If China becomes a democratic and multi-party country, I think it will be cleaner,” Hong Ming says. He is frustrated because he thinks the majority of people don’t realize this and that many foolishly still place their hope in the decisions of the central government and the party.

Yang You, a Beijing-based scholar, says China will take a long time to become a democratic country, but he thinks the party-controlled government can do something now if it really wants to eradicate corruption. First, the government should let nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have more room to operate. Second, the Communist Party should not restrain the media so tightly.

But there is no sign that the government is interested in taking such steps. In July 2009, Gongmeng (Open Constitution Initiative), an influential human rights NGO in Beijing, was investigated for “tax evasion” and its head, Xu Zhiyong, was detained by the police. “The action against this prominent young man means that the Communist Party is not going to lose any rights,” Yang says. “It still wants to control everything.”

As for the media, Guangzhou-based journalist Deng Xin says, “The control is tighter and tighter in recent years.”

“Things will deteriorate year by year if the Communist Party remains in power,” Yang worries. “Nobody could be optimistic about the future except those who don’t know the real situation.”

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