

By Xiao Chi An

Last April, Zhang Chong received a desperate phone call from Xia San, one of his brothers-in-law. “My car was towed by the police, I am afraid they are going to give me a big fine of 5,000 yuan (US\$665),” Xia said, sounding very frustrated. “Could you help me with it?”

Xia lives in a small town in Anhui province, a poor region where Zhang was raised. The fine was nearly six months of income. Like many farmers attempting to extricate themselves from poverty, Xia borrowed money to buy a cheap car and last year became a taxi driver. The problem was that Xia did not have a taxi license.

Zhang told his brother-in-law that he would try to help and called an old classmate, Cheng Jian, now the deputy party chief of the town. Cheng told Zhang that he happened to be good friends with the vice director of the transportation agency and that he would take care of the matter. A few days later Xia called his brother-in-law and told him he had retrieved his car and that he was back in the taxi business.

Xia described what transpired on the phone. He contacted Cheng and told him about the towing. He followed Cheng’s suggestion and called the vice director of transportation, Wang, and invited him, the police who towed the car and some other colleagues to dinner. Xia gave Wang a 500 yuan (US\$66) gift card as a “small gift.” The meal cost him 600 yuan (US\$80). The next day Xia paid a 500 yuan (US\$66) fine and got the car back. A few days later, he sent Cheng sent a small gift too.

“It’s a good deal, I spent 2,100 yuan (US\$279) but avoided a 5,000 yuan (US\$665) fine and more importantly I got to know the people who are in charge,” Xia said.

Nearly five months have passed, and Xia is doing very well. Although he still does not have a taxi license, he never forgets to send some “small gifts” to Wang and Cheng every now and again.

Xia’s experience is similar to thousands that take place across China every day. According to Transparency International’s 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index, which uses public opinion polls to measure corruption, China ranked 70 out of 163 countries and regions surveyed. Many Chinese, however, say they believe that China is among the most corrupt countries. This is not surprising given how pervasive corruption is in daily life.

If parents want to send their children to a good school, they had better invite the headmaster and some teachers to dinner, as well as provide a few monetary “gifts.” If people want doctors to be kind to their sick family members, they should be prepared to provide the doctors with money beyond medical fee. Bribes are given to the police for driver’s licenses, to officials for government jobs and even to judges for favorable rulings.

“Anytime people come across the trouble,” my father, a peasant in Anhui province, said, “the first thing they have to consider is not ‘Am I right?’ but ‘Do I know someone who is in charge? How much money must I spend to avoid the unfair treatment?’”

“Believe me, money can make anything possible, at least in China,” said journalist Ma Mu . “Many people know that the disclosure of corruption by the media is a very important way to fight corruption.” But in China, the media is controlled by the government, and the media “dare not to report any big cases without permission from government,” Mu said. “Journalists are not clean,” he added.

Mu illustrated with a story about himself. While working for the business news division of a municipal newspaper based in a rich city, Mu got know officials at the Bureau of Land Resource and House Management, the powerful governmental agency in charge of land use and development. One day a businessman who was seeking a license for a quarry approached Mu, saying he did not know anyone in the bureau. He promised Mu 100,000 yuan (US\$13,297) if he could introduce him to an official at the bureau.

“I invited one useful official from the bureau to dinner with the businessman,” Mu said. “I provided the official a VIP shopping card valued 30,000 yuan (US\$3,989) for his presence at the dinner. The official accepted, saying ‘I take it because I look at you as my younger brother, or else, I would refuse even if you gave me tons of gold!’ The businessman, the official and I had a dinner and I think they made the deal.”

Mu rationalized his action: “If the license is not given to this businessman, it would offered to another, and there must be bribe too — why shouldn’t I get to be the broker in this case?”

This is a common way of thinking in China. The mindset “if I don’t it, someone else will” allows people to feel comfortable with committing acts of corruption.

Most corruption in China involves members of the ruling Community Party of China (CPC). The situation is so serious that some say the country will be ruined if corrupt officials go unpunished. Others say, however, that the CPC will collapse if corrupt officials are brought to justice.

Actually, the Chinese government seems to realize the severity of the situation. Anti-corruption has been a topic of numerous conferences for the past 20 years. There are some signs that the government is fighting corruption. According to the Supreme People's Procuratorate of China, 67,505 officials were punished for bribes between 2003 and 2006.

In September 2006, Chen Liangyu was removed from his position as the powerful CPC Shanghai Committee Secretary, as well as his seat in the national legislature, the elite Politburo, for his role in the embezzlement of more than 3 billion yuan (US\$399 million) from Shanghai's pension fund. More than 20 government officials were implicated in the scandal. In July 2007, Zheng Xiaoyu, the former head of the State Food and Drug Administration, was executed for graft.

The government uses the number and rank of the punished officials to demonstrate its determination to fight corruption. Many publicly support the CPC's anti-corruption efforts, but privately many say the fight against graft cannot be truly effective as long as the one-party system remains.

The most powerful anti-corruption organization in China is the Central Disciplinary Inspection Commission (CDIC) of the CPC, not any department of the government.

"How can such a system work when a branch of the most corrupt party is in charge of anti-corruption?" said Yang Ping, a college administrator. "Democracy may not be a panacea for corruption, but it is better than a totalitarian system to fight the corruption. But the problem is, many people in China don't believe in democracy, they just hope for a wise controller, a kind government to save them, and the current government claims it is such a kind one. Many people, especially those with little education, even believe the central government is serious with the anti-corruption."

Like many educated people, Yang is pessimistic about the anti-corruption efforts in China. "Everybody hates corruption, but in this system, corruption works, so everybody does it when it is needed."