

## LAN DINGYUAN'S CASEBOOK

*Magistrates, the officials in charge of counties (xian), were the only representatives of the central government most people ever encountered. Their manner of enforcing laws, conducting trials, and collecting taxes affected the lives of all residents of the county. Local political life therefore cannot be understood without considering the behavior of magistrates.*

*Below are two cases that Lan Dingyuan (1680-1733) included in a record of his official experiences. Lan was from a scholarly family of Fujian province and was the author of several books. He never passed even the juren examinations, yet because of his participation in a military campaign and his reputation for knowledge of the coastal area, he was introduced to the emperor. Thereafter he was appointed magistrate of Puning and Chaoyang counties in Guangdong. His description of his activities is best read as a personal account; although he did not hesitate to brag, he also could not help but reveal the values, assumptions, and prejudices that he brought with him to his post as magistrate. In the two cases here, his views on popular religious beliefs and activities are particularly relevant.*

THE SPIRIT OF THE KING OF THE THREE  
MOUNTAINS TELLS EVERYTHING

One day Chen Agong rushed in to see me and begged me to try to discover the fate of his daughter.

He said, "My daughter, Qinniangu, is married to Lin Azhong. They live in the neighboring village. She has been married for three years but has had no children. Azhong's mother is very cruel and despises my daughter for coming from a poor family. On the 13th day of the ninth month when I went to see her, I could find no trace of her. I don't know whether she has been beaten to death,

sold off as a servant, or remarried into another household."

"Does your daughter often come back to visit you?" I asked.

He replied, "She came to see me in the eighth month and went back to her husband on the 6th day of the ninth month. You can ask Wang Asheng about this."

When I made inquiries into the case, Azhong's mother-in-law, Mrs. Xu, complained that the charges were unfair. She said, "I have been a widow for seventeen years and have one daughter-in-law. But from the time of her marriage she has visited her parents every month. In the seventh

month she went home twice. On the 6th day of the eighth month she went home again. On the 17th and the 24th day of the eighth month and on the 3rd day of the ninth month we unsuccessfully asked her to come back. I have no idea why she did not come back. Then on the 13th day of the ninth month Chen Agong came bursting into my home demanding to know the fate of his daughter. I am sure Agong has evil designs and has merely hidden his daughter away, hoping to marry her to someone else."

I questioned Chen Agong. "When exactly did your daughter leave your house? Did she walk or go by sedan chair? Who accompanied her?"

He replied, "My daughter told me she wanted to return to her husband on the 6th of the ninth month. I am a poor man and could not afford to hire a sedan chair to take her home, so I sent her brother, Aju, to accompany her half way. They set out walking from my house."

I asked, "What is the distance between your two residences?"

"It is over ten *li*," he answered.

Azhong and his mother cried out, "She did not come back. You can ask the neighbors."

I asked Wang Asheng, "When and where did you see Chen Agong's daughter return to her husband's place?"

Asheng said, "I only heard about it from Aju. I did not actually see them go. A short distance from my home lies King of the Three Mountains Temple. On the 6th day of the ninth month, while I was hoeing my garden on the left side of the road, I saw Aju coming back from the temple. He told me he had been asked by his father to accompany his sister who was returning to her husband. I asked him, 'Where is your sister now?' 'Already gone,' he replied. That is what I heard, and I know nothing else of the matter."

"Is the Chen family rich or poor?" I asked.

Asheng said, "They are very poor."

"How far is it from Agong's house to the temple?"

"About three *li*."

I pressed him further, "How many *li* are there between the Lin family residence and the temple?"

"That distance is around six or seven *li*."

With anger in my voice I demanded an explanation from Agong. "Your daughter is married and your family is not rich, yet you let her come home all the time in spite of the extra expense it brings you. How is this? When her husband's family tried to get her back, you would not let her go. On the 3rd day of the ninth month her husband requested that she return home, but you refused to let her. Why then would you all of a sudden send her home of your own free will on the 6th? Now let us consider the rest of your story. You did not instruct your boy to accompany her all the way to her husband's place but had him turn back in mid-journey. What were your intentions in bringing in Asheng, who had no connection with the case? Your son said that he had just casually mentioned a word of the affair to Asheng, and yet you have cited this as your main piece of evidence. I suspect you have plotted to remarry your daughter and have caused all this commotion."

Agong cried bitterly and loudly, "Father and child are most dear to each other. Although my family is poor, we have enough vegetables and water to make a tasty meal. When my daughter's husband urged her to come home, I didn't want her to leave, but later I realized that I was doing wrong to keep her and that I should let her go back. Isn't it reasonable that I should try to do the right thing in order to make up for my previous selfishness? As for my son's returning after going only halfway, the boy is still only a youngster, and so I didn't dare let him wander too far from home. I asked him to accompany her only halfway because I figured my son-in-law's home would then be close enough for her to get there without danger. My son returned home quite soon after they departed so I scolded him because I thought perhaps he had not accompanied her even halfway. He defended himself, saying, 'I passed the temple and Uncle Asheng saw me!' Now my daughter is missing and I am under suspicion. I am certainly one who appreciates the principle that a woman must be faithful to her husband all through her life. How then could I possibly let my daughter remarry when her husband is still alive?"

I questioned Aju, a boy of ten years. He said, "I escorted my sister to the front of the temple and then returned."

I asked, "Why didn't you take her all the way to her husband's place?"

"My father ordered me to take the livestock out to pasture, so I let my sister continue on alone after going halfway."

I threatened him, saying, "Your sister was kept home to be remarried. How dare you lie to me? If you do not tell me the truth, I will cut off your fingers."

Aju was terrified. He cried but said nothing more. I tried several ways to trick him, but he always replied, "No, not so."

I then asked him, "Is there a monk at the temple?"

"No," he replied.

"Are there any beggars?"

"No."

"Is there any family around the temple?"

"No."

"Is there a tree, creek, river, or pond there?"

"No."

"Are there any neighbors around your home?"

"No, there aren't any neighbors."

I really suspected that Chen Agong had sold his daughter, but he was cunning and stubborn, and Aju was still quite young. Therefore I could not use threats of torture to break the case. Then it came to me that southerners are afraid of ghosts and spirits. I would try to bring this to bear on the case.

Calling in the plaintiff and the defendant, I said, "Since neither of you has any substantial evidence to back up your allegations, it is rather difficult for me to make a judgment in this case. But since the boy and girl passed by the temple, the spirit of the King of the Three Mountains must know the true story. You all go home for the time being, and I will send an official dispatch to ask the spirit about the matter. I will resume court tomorrow."

The next day I called Chen Agong straight into the courtroom and, pounding on the table, reviled him: "What kind of human being are you? You

have hidden away your daughter and remarried her. Then you adopted the tactics of a shyster lawyer and came running with the first accusation so as to throw your opponent off balance. Who do you think you're fooling? Even though you lie to men, you cannot deceive Heaven. You know that Heaven is but three feet above our heads and that there are gods watching us all the time! The King of the Three Mountains has told me all. Are you still obstinate enough to stick to your story? I know who it was your daughter remarried, where she got married, and how much you received for her. If you do not buy her back, I will order that you be punished under the press."

Agong was so frightened that he could not answer back. He groveled on the floor, kowtowed, and begged for forgiveness.

I said, "If you get your daughter back, I will pardon you."

He blurted out, "Yes, certainly I will. It was the extreme poverty of my family that forced me to let my daughter remarry. She is now married into the Li family of Huilai, who paid three taels for her. I will sell my cow to buy her back."

I ordered Agong to be whipped thirty strokes and then to be clapped into the wooden collar for public humiliation in town. I gave him a stern warning: "If you redeem your daughter and bring her back, I will release you. If you don't, I will leave you in the collar until you die."

Agong thereupon sent his wife, Wang, to Huilai to buy back the daughter. The Li family demanded that she pay double the original price they had given for the girl, so Wang was forced to sell her youngest daughter as well as the cow to raise the money. Hearing of these events, the greedy first husband saw an opportunity to make six taels. He told Wang that he could not accept Qinliang back because she had lost her chastity and secretly came to terms with her, releasing Qinliang from all obligations to him for six taels. After he got the money from Wang, he married another girl. Qinliang remained with the Li family and did not have to be redeemed.

While all this was going on, Agong was forced to remain in the collar for nearly two months and

almost died. He moaned to his wife, "I regret that I did not sell the cow and our youngest daughter in the first place so that I could have avoided such a punishment. If I had only known that the King of the Three Mountains would tell everything! Now that the affair is finished, you must petition the magistrate to let me go."

When Wang told me what her husband said, I laughed and released him.

#### DEPRAVED RELIGIOUS SECTS DECEIVE PEOPLE

The people of Chaoyang believed in spirits and often talked about gods and Buddhas. The gentry regarded Da Dian [of the Tang Dynasty] as their great Buddhist master, and ladies of the gentry families joined together to go to the temples to worship the Buddha. In this way, heretical and depraved teachings developed and the so-called Latter Heaven sect became popular.

The origin of the Latter Heaven sect is unknown. Zhan Yucan and Zhou Awu first preached it in our area, claiming to have received the teaching from a white-bearded Immortal. When the former magistrate apprehended them, they ran away with their families but later returned to Chaoyang. The sect also called itself the "White Lotus" or the "White Willow." (It probably belonged to the "White Lotus Society" but found it expedient to use other names.)

Zhan Yucan's wife, Lin, was thought to be the "Miraculous Divine Lady." She claimed to possess the ability to summon wind and rain and to give orders to gods and spirits. She was the leader of the Latter Heaven sect and was assisted by her paramour, Hu Aqiu, who called himself the "Ben Peak Divine Gentleman." These two cast spells and used magic charms and waters to cure illness and to help pray for heirs. They even claimed to be able to help widows meet their deceased husbands at night.

The people of Chaoyang adored them madly; hundreds of men and women worshipped them as their masters. People from Chenghai, Jieyang, Haiyang, Huilai, and Haifeng made pilgrimages

here carrying gifts of money, animals, wine, and flowers to offer in worship. On the 10th day of the second month of winter on my return from the prefectural city I was informed of these events. By this time members of the sect had already constructed a large building in the northern part of the county where they established a preaching hall and gathered several hundred followers. They hired actors for a period of two days to celebrate the opening of their church. I dispatched runners to apprehend the sect leaders, but the runners were afraid to offend the gods lest the soldiers of hell punish them. Besides, the local officials and many of the influential families favored the sect. So they all escaped.

I, therefore, went to the place myself, pushed my way into the front room, and arrested the Divine Lady. Then I went further into the house to search for her accomplices. The place was like a maze, filled with concealed rooms. Even by day one had to light a torch to get around, or one would bump into people in the dark and easily get lost. It was indeed an ideal place to hide criminals. As I proceeded on my search, above the Divine Lady's bedroom, in a dark, concealed chamber, I seized Yao Asan, Yang Guangqin, Peng Shizhang, and about a dozen other men. Similarly, above the Divine Gentleman's bedroom I found a wooden seal of the Empress Lady of the Moon, a heretical sutra, incense, a wig, and clothes, but at this time I had no idea of how they were used. I looked all around for the Divine Gentleman. Finally, the local rowdies as well as certain influential families, knowing they could no longer hide him, handed over Hu Aqiu. Through questioning him, I learned of all his occult tricks.

In fact, these charlatans had no special powers whatsoever but used incense and costumes to bewilder people. The foolish people who trembled on just hearing the names of gods and spirits were impressed when they saw that the Divine Lady had no fear of gods and goddesses. Hu Aqiu, who accompanied her, wore rouge, female clothing, and a wig. People believed Hu was the genuine Empress Lady of the Moon and never suspected he was a man.

When these pious women entered his bedroom and ascended to the upper chamber, they would be led to worship the Maitreya Buddha and to recite the charms of the *Precious Flower sutra*. Then stupefying incense was burned and the women would faint and fall asleep so the leaders of the sect could do whatever they pleased. (This incense was also called soul-bewildering incense; people who inhaled it would feel tired and want to sleep.) Later members would cast spells and give the women cold water to drink to revive them. The so-called "praying for heirs" and the "meeting with a deceased husband" occurred while the women were dreaming and asleep.

The members of the Latter Heaven sect were extremely evil; even hanging their heads out on the streets would have been insufficient punishment for their crimes. However, this had been a year of bad harvest, so the villagers already had lots of worries. Moreover, the case involved many people, including members of local gentry families. Therefore, sympathetic to the people's troubles and wanting to end the matter, I destroyed the list of those involved which the culprits had divulged during the trial.

I had Lin, the "Divine Lady," and Hu Aqiu beaten and put in the collar, placing them outside the court so that the people could scorn them, beat them, and finally kill them. As to Zhan Yucan, the man who had allowed his wife to commit such a heinous crime, and his accomplices, Yao Ashan

and some ten other people, they were all beaten and put in the collar as punishment. I inquired no further into the matter so that the other accomplices could repent and start a new life. I confiscated the sect's building, destroyed the concealed rooms, and converted it into a literary academy dedicated to the worship of the five great [neo-Confucian] teachers. Thus the filthy was swept away and the clean restored.

In my leisure time, on the days of the new and the full moon, I went to the academy to lecture or discuss literature with the people of the county. Zhang Pi gave one hundred bushels of grain for the salary of a teacher, allowances for the students, and the expenses of the spring and autumn school sacrifices. As formal study developed, heretical beliefs ceased to exist. The morality and customs of the people also changed for the better. Commander Shang and Governor Yang heard about the elimination of the depraved sect and sighed in admiration: "Without the elimination of this sect, great damage would have occurred. It is a marvelous accomplishment to have gotten rid of it. The magistrate expelled the evil but refrained from seeking fame for himself. Had he not done so, many people in the area would have been put into jail and many women would have committed suicide by night. It is indeed an act of great mercy to preserve others' reputations."

*Translated by Jeh-hang Lai and Lily Hwa*