

## THE BALANCE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH – EXTRACT



Was it not enough that the day had already begun so badly?

On his arrival in town with the caravan from Chengdu, the new Magistrate had walked straight past the August Hall of Historical Records, ignoring all tradition and protocol that he should first present himself there with his credentials. More importantly, he had ignored the special reception of food and drink the clerks had laid on for him, and had gone directly to the jail. If the rumours were true, he had then fallen immediately asleep at his desk.

And now word had been sent that there had been a murder – supposedly of an old man, on his way home from a tavern, just minding his own business, and wanting to get home to his family.

Had any tenure of any magistrate started in such a rude and ill-omened manner?

Senior Scribe Xu didn't think so.

He hurried across the market-square towards the jail, accompanied by Junior Scribe Li – the best and the brightest of his young clerks – who was clutching hastily grabbed paper and writing materials to his chest.

“Do we know the name of the murdered man?” asked Junior Scribe Li, his eyes wide with fear, either in anticipation of a first encounter with the new magistrate or with a dead body.

Senior Scribe Xu shook his head, still bitterly regretting the great expense he had gone to in laying out a reception for the Magistrate and the great embarrassment he had felt when he had stood in the doorway with the other clerks as they watched the caravan enter the market-square and the Magistrate – easily recognisable in the throng – not even glance their way. The Magistrate had walked directly to the jail, met the young constables at the gate, and then had disappeared inside. Senior Scribe had thought it possible the Magistrate might re-emerge; but, after some long and

difficult moments, Senior Scribe Xu had led all his clerks back within the August Hall of Historical Records while wishing his friend, Magistrate Qian, was still alive, and that these new, disturbing events had not come to pass.

“Perhaps our new magistrate is overtired and not thinking,” had said Junior Scribe Li, trying to be helpful.

“Or perhaps he just doesn’t care,” Senior Scribe Xu had muttered; but quietly, to himself. He did not want to frighten his young clerks.

On entering the gloom of the jail, Senior Scribe Xu put all these thoughts out of his mind. He found the jail-room crowded with men. Not only were the four young constables present, but also (he discovered their identities later) the neighbours of the deceased – there to observe the examination, both with sadness and unflinching fascination.

Physician Ji and Apothecary Hong had already begun their work. The naked body of an old man had been laid out on a long table, which Senior Scribe Xu guessed had been borrowed at some haste from a market-trader. At the head of the table, staring at the late-comers, was a hawk-eyed and bearded young man who, despite looking pale and drawn, and whose black robes were dirty and worn, and whose black silk hat did not sit as straight as it should, had the presence of one born into power and high office.

“Magistrate, forgive our lateness. I am Senior Scribe Xu. I am accompanied by Junior Scribe Li who is qualified to take the appropriate notes.” Senior Scribe Xu bowed low. He hoped Junior Scribe Li was doing the same.

“Murder is the most heinous of crimes, Senior Scribe Xu. Do you not agree?” asked Magistrate Zhu, his tone barbed and cold.

Without thinking, Senior Scribe Xu nodded.

“Then why is it, Senior Scribe Xu, that I find only four constables in this district when there should be at least ten for a town of this size – and these four constables without uniforms or batons or swords or bows of any kind? And why are there no investigating sheriffs in post, when there should be at least one, better yet two? And why is there no official Examiner of Bodies to prepare for me a report on the causes of death?”

Physician Ji and Apothecary Hong, who had up to then been happily examining finger-nails, and poking and prodding the dead body, stopped what they were doing. All eyes looked to Senior Scribe Xu. There was more than the chill of death in the room.

At least for these questions, quite expected, Senior Scribe Xu had prepared some appropriate answers.

“Magistrate, Physician Ji is fully qualified and—”

“Senior Scribe Xu, I have never heard of a man who devotes his life to healing who also devotes his life to the causes of death,” interrupted Magistrate Zhu. “In the whole of Kaifeng, which has more murders than you can dream of, there is not such a physician who spends his days examining bodies. I expect the truth is that there isn’t the cash to fulfil such a post as Examiner of Bodies in Tranquil Mountain. Physician Ji has already explained to me that being ten days travel from Chengdu we are too far

to send for such a man, even though in any instance of suspected murder there should always be a second inquest or re-examination of the body by an Examiner from a neighbouring district.”

“Magistrate, the body would be so decomposed that—”

“Senior Scribe Xu, irregularities in process give rise to irregular decisions. Irregular decisions give rise to injustice. The people expect that officials perform their allotted functions regardless of how far apart districts are.”

“Yes, Magistrate, but Prefect Kang in Chengdu has given us special dispensation to—”

“And you should know, as a senior clerk, that as magistrate I should not even be present at an inquest. It is an abuse of process. That is why we have sheriffs: to investigate crimes, to gather evidence and witnesses, and to finally present them all to me so I can consider my judgement.”

Without another word, Magistrate Zhu turned and walked from the room, towards his office and private apartment.

After some difficult moments, Physician Ji tugged at his long white beard to straighten it, and smiled at Senior Scribe Xu, his kindly eyes sparkling. “Senior Scribe Xu, I understand that Magistrate Zhu is most exhausted from his long journey. He has come not just from Chengdu but from Kaifeng and has been on the road some months – the winter months at that. He has also just explained to me that his expertise is in crimes of corruption, not murder. This is the first crime of violence he has been required to investigate – and to observe.”

“And murder is always the most affecting of crimes,” added Apothecary Hong.