

Submitted by:- Peter Kearon

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Crime and Punishment

(with apologies to Feodor Dostoyehsky)

An unbelievable account of a little-known happening in Chinese Railway History only recently revealed by a veteran Workshop Controller.

Part 1

Memorable must be the word to describe my recent organised trip to China, where we were able to see considerable numbers of gigantic freight locomotives, 4-10-4s and 2-10-2s sometimes working in pairs, sometimes banked by ungainly 0-8-0s on coal, ore and steel product trains being worked on the formidable inclines above Shanghai. Tour arranged by Husan Travel, Welwyn Garden City using enthusiasts' vintage Illyshin IL-18 turbo props flying out of Scarboro'. £1,200 inclusive 10-day tour with guaranteed two footplate sessions. A few yuang coins in the driver's hand gives complete control of regulator, brakes and reverser from the driver's seat. (Usual disclaimer).

But I found even more memorable were the reminiscences of Li Jeng, elderly controller of the famous Hunan Locomotive Works. Your humble penman may well be fluent in Hong Kong Cantonese, but Mandarin, as spoken by Li Jeng is a very different language and it must be admitted that the intonations, inflections and nuances of Li Jeng's correct high-class speech were doubtless often misunderstood and in consequence his seemingly bizarre story is not guaranteed in every detail. But to the best of my so limited knowledge he told me this remarkable chain of events.

Many years ago, even before the birth of our own venerable Chairman, there existed in the West of China a famous railway company whose locomotives, painted in rich green with polished motion and gleaming brightwork, were the envy of all other railways. Although built in Glasgow by what became known as the North British Locomotive Company, many design improvements had been provided to the instructions of that most renowned engineering director, Ho Wong, such that his company's locomotives were the most powerful, speedy, efficient and economical in all the land. Incidentally, we learned that Ho Wong named his illustrious elder son, Ho George Wong and his celebrated younger son, Ho Jackson Wong.

All should have been calm and happiness but success so often creates jealousy and this deadly sin was embodied in the form of the permanent way director Deng Yeung. Deng Yeung hated locomotives and, with some truth, complained that the use of large heavy fast locomotives was the only reason why his track and points became worn and even damaged. He complained about every possible locomotive misdemeanour; when on one occasion an express tank engine derailed on a main line, he demanded that the whole class should be withdrawn. High speed tests on the main line of another - admittedly inferior - railway proved these engines to be completely stable, whereas the track where the derailment had taken place was sunken and waterlogged. Despite this evidence, Ho Wong made no complaint and in fact did rebuild these tank engines to a tender design, which by some chance were at that time more in demand on an extended passenger service.

On another occasion Deng Yeung claimed that a new class of powerful Atlantics was responsible for deforming his points and spreading the track at curves and he insisted that these engines were unacceptable. They were in fact kept on shed for short time but on their inevitable use they immediately gained a reputation of smoothness and easy riding and proved to be a credit to Ho Wong's inspired design capability.

But matters took a much more serious turn when one day Deng Yeung demanded an immediate

meeting with Ho Wong on an issue, he said, of the greatest urgency. Deng Yeung, with his fellow directors, was ushered into Ho Wong's office and as usual offered tea (China) and rice biscuits while sentiment of mutual respect and admiration were exchanged. Then came the bombshell. "With great and heartfelt regret I must tell you that no fewer than five of your senior drivers have each been seen by my own colleagues when running past the Company cottages (where drivers live) to throw a large lump of coal into the gardens backing onto the down main line and at the same time sounding the whistle which alerts a housewife to appear and gather up the valuable fuel."

Deng Yeung barely paused for breath before continuing, "I would respectfully remind you sir that such blatant fraud, theft and dishonesty displays total betrayal of our great company. These are serious planned offences and calculated insults which show a complete denial of the just laws which govern our great company and worse, prove by their treachery contempt of our Immortal Railway God who watches over our every action. Such treason demands only one penalty - death."

He continued, "In such a situation where the overwhelming evidence is incontrovertible I would remind you that the Great Railway God can be appeased only if these miserable felons are executed by being bound and thrown into the white hot furnace of a locomotive - not only to expiate their sins but as a deterrent to others."

(Dear fellow Members you may feel such punishment to be harsh but it has been said that prisoners so executed have found the experience exciting and rewarding. Perhaps in the same way that a fox, after a jolly good chase, is said to enjoy being torn apart by a few dozen hounds). Ho Wong listened impassively and gave not the slightest indication that these revelations held for him any concern. When, finally he spoke it was to thank Deng Yeung most warmly for investigating and exposing such heinous criminal offences being perpetrated by trusted men in his own particular department and went on to congratulate Deng Yeung on his diligence in unmasking these evil men and bringing to light so promptly their disgraceful deeds. Ho Wong sympathised with the deep distress that must be felt by Deng Yeung and his esteemed colleagues in sending these five culprits to a so-deserved fate, but duty must be done even in the most heartrending circumstances. It could only be hoped that their earthly punishment would reduce, even slightly the retribution which would shortly be meted out by the Great Railway God. With profuse apologies Ho Wong explained that he did not immediately have a suitable locomotive prepared for such special task but promised that on the following day all would be ready. With every mutual felicitation Deng Yeung and his fellow officers took their departure

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....and now what you've all be waiting for - the second, and final part of Peter Kearon's chilling chinese tale:

The following morning at a rather earlier time than was expected, Ho Wong sent a messenger begging Deng Yeung and his fellow associated to honour his humble office with their esteemed presence. Ho Wong looked completely untroubled as he offered tea and biscuits and made light conversation about the weather and the price of rice. When all were comfortably settled Ho Wong began.

"I have had the opportunity of considering your most worthy disclosures, and again I offer you good gentlemen my most sincere thanks for making me aware of the wicked practice which has been perpetrated by these five scoundrels." Deng Yeung's eyes appeared to give the slightest flicker of pleasure. Continued Ho Wong, "I have taken the opportunity of investigating personally this sad affair and have strongly interrogated the villains. That they are guilty is beyond question; that they each begged forgiveness and each offered an identical excuse merely proves collusion and in itself underlines their guilt. They each produced the same story that a lump of coal on a highly loaded

tender, quite usual when departing from the terminal, sometimes does fall off onto the trackside and could perchance bounce into the gardens of the company cottages. That a womanfolk would remove any falling debris was merely to protect the vegetable plot from damage. The whistle was always blown at this place, but was done merely to alert a permanent way gang which for some time had been working on the track section just at that location."

"I cursed them for being liars and thieves and for their dishonesty and treachery and vowed to them that the Great Railway God could not be mocked and for certain he would inflict his most severe displeasure on them in the afterworld. Even now they are bound and are locked in the lamp room awaiting their fate."

"But, fellow officers, I am deeply disturbed at the clever structure of lies and half truths that they have woven together. Their imitation of truth and indeed had you not told me of your own impeccable eye-witness evidence it is not beyond denial that even I may well have innocently believed their smooth, treacherous posturing. Think then of the mortal perils that we officials are facing. If these villains have been able to weave a web of such clever deceit that even the highest company officials can be misled, then is it not possible - even likely - that the Great Railway God could be similarly misinformed by their vile silken tongues. Our God has, after all, many important and difficult problems to deal with each day and it would just be possible he would be too busy to spend time interrogating and exposing these scoundrels."

"Imagine then our own fate when we one day arrive to face this endless wrath for the dispatch of, what he would believe to be, blameless men sent to an early death by our own wrongful orders. I'm afraid that any protestations, unsupported by fellow officers (unless by the merest chance we should die together) would be brushed aside. I am in the deepest despair and filled with endless fear."

"There is just one way in which justice can be ensured. Even before the rogues stand before the seat of justice it is essential that our Great Railway God hears the truth as witnessed by our own steadfast men. It is necessary for one of these honest witnesses to accompany the five scoundrels so that their foul lies can be countered by clear eye-witness evidence of their wicked deeds which will ensure that their undoubted guilt will be plain to see. I know that all of you will demand the honour of being chosen to perform this heroic mission and I sympathise with those who inevitably are turned away. The lucky winner, whose name will be carved on a stone plaque to be erected at our main terminus, forever to be blessed, will be the first to enter the furnace to give a little time to put the undeniable truth to our Great Railway God before those five worthless characters arrive."

"Go now and choose your most worthy representative and honoured comrade. Already our finest locomotive 'Empress of China' has been lit up and by noon will carry a full head of steam with the brightest fire. (The warm-hearted Chinese consider it unfair, even cruel, to plunge a prisoner into a dull fire, as it could cause prolonged discomfort).

"Fellow officers, do not delay, return before noon with your elected hero so that swift and sure justice can be carried out."

Deng Yeung and his colleagues looked strangely apprehensive as they filed out and, unusually, failed to respond to H Wong's promises of everlasting co-operation and undying friendship. But it was a very short time before Deng Yeung appeared again at the door of Ho Wong's office looking extremely concerned, and in his confusion failed to notice the proffered hospitality customarily partaken. He was clearly in a hurry, and without more ado, but with much hand wringing, explained that there had been a regrettable mistake. "I have only just learned", explained Deng Yeung, "that the foreman platelayer in charge of the rail section from the station is a lazy, incompetent liar, who neglectfully has allowed the track near the company cottages to fall into a disgraceful condition, causing locomotives to roll to such an extent, that lumps of coal have often been dislodged from heavily loaded tenders. Furthermore, you kindly, highly trained top-link drivers have always blown a

caring warning note on their whistles to warn of danger to the track workers. Be sure this man will be severely punished."

It took some time for Ho Wong to consider the implications of this information and as the minutes to noon were ticking away, Deng Yeung and his fellow officers showed distinct signs of suffering from oppressive heat, although, in truth, the weather was remarkably clement for that time of year. Finally, Ho Wong gave his response. "As you have now been able to clear up the situation in your usual competent manner, it would be wrong to trouble our Great Railway God with a litany of misunderstandings. The true culprit has been found; this matter must be put behind us.

Please celebrate your clever investigative skills by joining me in drinking a glass of rice wine." From the terminus came the unmistakable sound of a four-cylinder engine pulling away and soon 'Empress of India' roared past Ho Wong's office window. A short time later, the mocking shriek of its whistle could be heard as it reached the company cottages.

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Peter Kearon