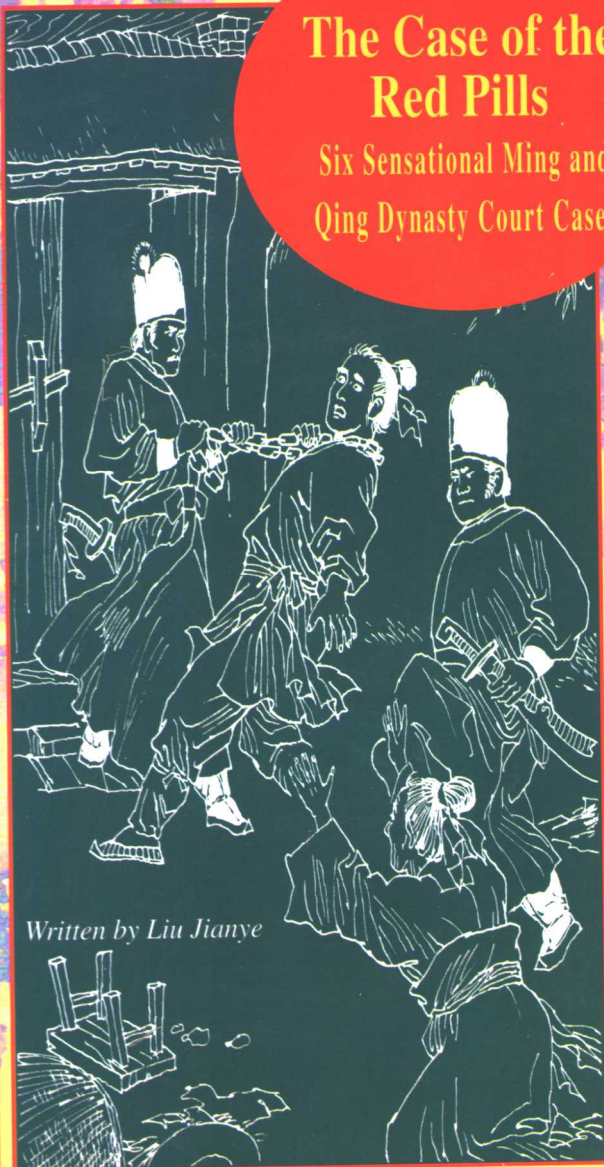


The Case of the Red Pills

Six Sensational Ming and
Qing Dynasty Court Cases



Written by Liu Jianye

Foreign Languages Press Beijing

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—*Six Sensational Ming and Qing*
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CONTENTS

Prologue	1
The Wrongs of a Noble-Hearted Girl	3
The Mystery of a Roadside Female Corpse	40
The Attempted Assassination of the Crown Prince	83
The Case of the Red Pills	112
A Murdered Wife Resurrected	138
Murder in Seven-Ravine Bridge	208

Prologue

A few famous court cases were tried in the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, creating a great stir in society at that time. These cases, some involving the common people and some involving the ruling houses, were very complicated and fraught with twists and turns, some of them remaining uncleared even to this day. Selected in this book are six stories based on six celebrated cases, the details of which are presented to readers in an autoptic style, disclosing some of the hitherto unknown events that took place inside the Forbidden City and outside.

The Wrongs of a Noble-Hearted Girl

In 1525, the fourth year of Jiajing's reign in the Ming Dynasty, a surprising incident happened in the Imperial Bodyguards Northern Prison, which had been set up to hold "thieves and other law-breakers."

A young female prisoner, Li Yuying, wrote to Emperor Jiajing to complain of an injustice. The case was veiled in mystery and it emerged and died away several times. Eventually, a fair-minded and courageous judge happened to hear it. After he had made great efforts to clear all the obstacles, the truth was revealed and the real criminals were brought to justice. Because the case was heard by the Chinyiwei (Imperial Bodyguards)* first and was only brought to Emperor Jiajing's attention after a long time, it caused a great stir throughout the country. It was considered one of the most sensational cases in the middle years of the Ming Dynasty.

"A stunningly beautiful girl has been sentenced to be hacked to death by the Imperial Bodyguards Northern

* Chinyiwei (literally "embroidered uniform guard unit"), the most prestigious and influential of the Imperial Guards (Chinchunwei) in the Ming Dynasty functioned as the personal bodyguards of the Emperor and cooperated with influential eunuchs in maintaining an empire-wide, irregular police and judicial service.

Prison. She is going to be executed in the forthcoming autumn." As the news spread, many people in the prison sighed while some old prison guards even could not hold back their tears.

In the guardroom in a corner of the prison, some guards were drinking, while talking about the beauty and the crime she had committed. A half-drunk young guard, with his blood-shot eyes glaring, asked "What did she do? How could she get such a severe punishment? To be hacked to death!"

An old guard sitting beside him answered in a sorrowful voice, with sympathy: "Adultery. What a pity! She's so young and pretty."

The young guard seemed to be excited by the crime of adultery and got even more drunk. "Adultery? With whom?" he asked, his face glowing. "Who is the man? I met this prisoner a few times. Look at that face, even lady Yang, the favorite of the Tang Dynasty emperor Xuanzong was not that beautiful. What a pity!"

A middle-aged guard with a gloomy face shook his head in disagreement: "Adultery? I don't believe it. Such a graceful girl would never do such an immoral thing. Aren't there too many cases of injustice in the prison? She will, maybe, become one of those ghosts who haunt the prison wailing for justice."

The group seemed to be depressed by these words, and they all fell silent. Today, all the guards in the prison seemed to be anxious about something. After a while, some of the younger guards walked into the corridor and peeked out; then they went to the female wards and whispered to the women guards. The fact of the matter was, they were looking forward to a glimpse of the peerless beauty who was now the talk of the prison.

After noon, Li Yuying was escorted back to the prison by seven or eight female guards, her ankles fettered with heavy shackles. The corridor was packed with made guards who were waiting for a look at the beauty. Even the prisoners pressed their faces against the iron bars, straining their eyes to see her. Li Yuying was about seventeen years old. Although brutal torture made her appear haggard and hardly able to walk, and her dress was in rags, the slender figure, the pretty chin and the lovely mouth still expressed her extraordinary beauty. Especially her bright eyes, although clouded over with sadness and worry, still shone with exceptional youthful elegance. She staggered across the corridor, her head lowered, eyes filled with tears, teeth biting tensely on her lower lip. She seemed to be unconscious of her surroundings as she was led by the guards to the death cell. In her mind still lingered that unbearable scene in the main hall of the yamen forever branded in her memory...

The malicious judge had stared at her with the insatiable eyes, ferociously questioning her about the whole illicit affair. Mortified, she did not make any reply, her head slightly dropping.

Prompted by the judge, two Imperial Body guards brutally forced opened her hands and put the *zanzi* (clamps) between her fingers. In no time at all, extreme pain shot through her body. She let out a shrill scream and then lost consciousness....

The confession statement was spread out before her, and she could vaguely read: "Fornicating shamelessly, humiliating and bullying her mother, privately writing love letters to her lover, corrupting morals...". Her bloody fingerprint appeared distinctly at the bottom....

The judge was announcing coldly: "Li Yuying, adulteress, carried on an illicit affair for a long time, behaved unfilially, and plotted to kill her stepmother... She is hereby sentenced to death by the process of hacking and will be executed in the forthcoming autumn."

Li Yuying did not dare to recall it anymore. Anyhow, all was finished and everything would be over soon. What would it be like being hacked to death? Maybe it was better than undergoing torture. "Let it come, the sooner the better," she thought. "So that I will not stand trial in the main hall of the yamen every day and suffer all the tortures." As she was lost in these thoughts, the door of the female death-row cell was opened with a clanking noise. The dark prison cell looked like the gate to hell. Li Yuying was pulled over to the door and thrown into the cell. Then the door was slammed shut behind her and locked up with heavy chains. The cell was as dark as night, hardly could Li Yuying see anything. The stinking smell of the mildewed hay mat was overpowering. Her fingers that had been squeezed open by the *zanai* swelled terribly. She tried to rub the fingers, but the sharp pain threw her on to the hay.

In this semi-conscious state, the nightmare of what happened one year ago haunted Yuying again as she relived her arrest and delivery to the prison.

It had been a dark midsummer's night. Yuying had done embroidery for almost the whole evening. Just as she laid down in the bed, she heard someone shouting outside: "Get the adulterers!" Several torches appeared from nowhere and the door of her bedroom was pounded and kicked mightedly, making a big racket. Yuying quickly covered herself with some clothes.

Hardly had she got out of the bed than the door was forced open. Her stepmother Jiao, her maternal uncle Jiao Rong and two maids forced themselves moistly into the room. The stepmother scrutinized Yuying from head to foot, her eyes like two vicious swords. Jiao Rong stared at Yuying's plump chest lustfully. Yuying was so embarrassed to discover that in her rush she had not tidied her collar and her breasts were slightly visible. Her youthful modesty made her lower her head and quickly pull her clothes in order.

Her stepmother shouted in a rage: "The intrigant has escaped, but the intriguante is still here! Search for evidence!"

Jiao Rong and the maids began to rummage around in the room. But nothing suspicious was found. Jiao Rong looked to her stepmother for help. The women started to search herself. She turned the shabby cloth box over and shook the thin quilt open, but still found nothing she needed. Then she walked to the dressing table in front of the window and opened the girl's make-up box. Inside the box there was no rouge and no jewelry, only a silver hairpin which had been left to Yuying by her own mother. The stepmother opened a small drawer in the make-up box and found several poems written by Yuying to express her melancholy feelings. All the secrets in Yuying's heart were expressed in these poems. Each time when she finished a poem, she hid it in the small drawer inside the make-up box to keep others from seeing it. Now the poems were found by her stepmother. How embarrassing! The woman scanned the poems quickly. Then she seemed to discover some important evidence.

She pointed to one of the poems and asked in a

sharp voice: "Whisper with sadness, part with grief,' what's the meaning of this? Whom do you whisper to? Aren't you too young to worry about parting? Here is another one: 'The silent wooden door locks the end of the spring.' Obviously you feel lonely because your lover didn't come on time! What excuse do you have?"

Jiao Rong fiddled for a while with the silver hairpin with ill-intentions. Then he whispered to her stepmother while pointing at the inscription on the hairpin: "unshakable resolve." The stepmother became even more outraged after seeing these words.

She flung the hairpin on the ground and shouted at Yuying: "Where did you get this from? Wasn't it given by your lover? (Unshakeable resolve,) My! How deep is this love. Tell me! Who is the man? Or I'll tear up your lips!"

What ridiculous libel! The silver hairpin had been given to Yuying's father, Li Xiong, as a gift by Prince, Cheng. When Yuying's father was young, he had worked at Cheng's mansion. Cheng had thought highly of Li Xiong's honesty and loyalty. So he had the silver hairpin custom-made as a gift for Li Xiong. What an absurd thing to link this hairpin with an intrigant! Overwhelmed by anger and embarrassment, Yuying couldn't say a word. At this moment, a servant called Li Qiang'er came in, holding a man's shoe and said he had found a shoe when searching outside.

"It was left in the woods dozens of meters away from the wall of the yard," Li Qiang'er said. "It looks like it was lost by a man when he jumped over the wall and escaped in a hurry." The stepmother took the shoe and brought it in front of Yuying's face: "You unfilial girl," she said viciously, "You dishonor the family! I always forgave you when you contradicted what I said

every day, but now you seduce an intrigant! How do you expect me to face your father! Now, here is all the evidence. I cannot harbor you and cover up all your evil deeds because you are my daughter. Jiao Rong, send her to the Imperial Bodyguards yamen and have her charged with adultery and unfilial conduct. I don't want others to point at me and say I raised a whore!"

The uncle and two servants tied Yuying up and dragged her to the Imperial Bodyguard yamen...

Yuying was awakened by the noise of heavy chains. The cell was as dark as before. Another female prisoner was being escorted out. She was weeping, her clothes torn into rags. Yuying knew she was going to be tried again. How could anyone bear the tortures of beating, hanging, *zanzi*, hammering of bamboo chips into fingernails and branding with a heated iron on bare skin... Privately, she sympathized with these prisoners. She even believed that there was not one real criminal in the prison.

With the help of the damp wall, Yuying struggled to sit up. The wounds all over her body from the tortures remained burningly painful. However, she was very calm inside. "It is only some twenty days before the execution. Then, I will be completely extricated from this pain. Then, my beautiful youth, my knowledge and talent will all be gone. It is said that after people die, they can meet their deceased families in hell. It means that I will be able to see father, mother and lovely little brother Li Chengzu...". Yuying was lost in fantasy, her eyes slightly closed. The smiling faces of her parents appeared before her again. All the good times from when she was young came to mind. Yuying's father Li Xiong had been a *qianhu* (company commander) in the Imperial

Bodyguards. At that time, many officials of the Imperial Bodyguards were imperious and despotic. But her father was not one of them. Li Xiong always taught Yuying and her bother and sisters to be polite, honest and kind. Yuying also had a loving mother who had cherished them very much. Unfortunately Yuying's mother died when Yuying's brother was only two years old. However, Yuying could never let go of her mother's deep love.

Li Xiong often had to leave home on official missions. In order to have someone to take care of the children, Li Xiong married Jiao. In the second year of their marriage, Jiao gave birth to a boy named Li Yanu. In order to have Li Xiong's official post inherited by her own son, Jiao began to maltreat Chengzu*

At first, only when Li Xiong was not at home did Jiao beat Chengzu and refuse to give him enough food. The suffering through such cruelty made the ten-year-old boy bony and weak, but the boy never shed tears before his sisters. He didn't want them to be worrying about him. Each time when the sisters touched the bruises in his face and burst into tears, he would comfort them, saying, "It is no big deal. Don't cry, sisters." Once, the vicious stepmother gave the boy no food for three straight days. Chengzu was too starved to move. That evening, Yuying and her sisters secretly saved some rice gruel and brought it to Chengzu. For the first time the small boy couldn't keep back his tears as his eldest sister held him. Tears fell down his bony face like pearls. The sisters and brother clung to one another deep autumn their faces awashed in tears. The cold, deep autumn

* In feudal China, only the eldest son had the right to inherit the father's official post.

moonlight shone on the four poor children. The only hope was their father. They were looking forward to their father's early return. But for now, they were surrounded by nothing but freezing cold.

An old Chinese saying goes: "Blessings never arrive in pairs, while misfortune never comes singly." Just as the children were suffering under their stepmother's tyranny, their father was killed in a war in Shaanxi Province (in China's northwest). While the children were overwhelmed with grief, their stepmother went further in her maltreatment of Chengzu. She forced him to go to the battlefield which was hundreds of miles away to look for his father's remains. Obviously she wanted to trap the boy in a dilemma rather than to teach him to be filial. Chengzu knew he had no other choice. He prepared a simple pack and went resolutely to Shaanxi. It was a snowy morning when the girls saw their little brother off. Looking at that naive face, the girls' eyes welled with broken-hearted tears. Chengzu knelt down to give his grieved sisters a kowtow and then carrying his simple pack, decisively marched on his way to Shaanxi. In no time, his skinny figure disappeared in the snow.

Not long after Chengzu left, Guiying was sold to a rich family as a maidservant. The other sister, Taoying, meanwhile could not bear the maltreatment and escaped. She tried to hide at their maternal grandmother's, but was pursued and forced back. She was whipped so severely that she nearly died. Since then, the smallest complaint would usually lead to a scolding and whipping. The wounds overlapped all over Taoying's emaciated body. As time passed, Jiao's heart grew harder and harder, and her punishment of the girls became crueler and crueler. The sisters could do nothing to protect

themselves but cry in each other's arms. One year later, Chengzu came back home unexpectedly. He carried with him his father's remains instead of the simple luggage.

Their brother's return brought some vitality back to Yuying and her sisters. Chengzu often told his sisters about the hardships on his way to Shaanxi. The sisters often comforted their little brother with the saying: "One who can endure the hardest of all hardships will become the greatest of all men." But this good spell did not last long. Who could imagine how the cruel-hearted stepmother was malevolently plotting to stop Chengzu from taking back the rights of primogeniture from her own son. She tricked Chengzu into drinking a bowl of vegetable soup in which she had put arsenic. The poor boy! He had survived the dangerous journey to the west, but couldn't survive his stepmother's cold-blooded murderousness. To avoid incrimination, Jiao unscrupulously chopped the body into pieces and had them thrown into the flowing city moat. Then, Jiao framed the case of adultery against Yuying and had her put behind the bars.

After Jiao Rong handed in the so-called criminal evidence against Yuying, Chen Yin, commander of the Imperial Bodyguards, who was in charge of the case, gave credence at once to the accuser's statement. He did not even give Yuying a chance to explain, but blindly tried to force her to confess who the intrigant was. Yuying had kept silent since she had been sent to the Imperial Bodyguards yamen. She knew very clearly that once she entered the Imperial Bodyguard's prison, there was little hope of getting out alive. Poor Yuying, even under such terrible circumstances, she was still concerned about the continuity of the family line—she worried that

if she told the truth, Jiao would be punished severely, then nobody would raise her three-year-old brother Li Yanu. If Yanu was starved or frozen to death, Li's family would have no inheritors. She would be the criminal in the family. Therefore, for the past year, although Yuying went through all kinds of torture till she had scars strung together like beads, she had never given any confession. Another half a year passed, but without Yuying's confession and without any sign of the intrigant, Chen Yin could not wind up the case. He laid all the blame at Yuying's door so his hatred of her became more and more intense. Eventually, he had to employ the customary tactics. He had Yuying's fingerprint pressed on a confession which had been written up by someone else while Yuying fainted away from the torture. Then the case was closed. Yuying was jailed in the death-row cell, awaiting execution in autumn. In the Imperial Bodyguards prison, unjust cases happened almost every day. So once a case was settled, normally there was little possibility of reversing the verdict.

At that time, in the political infighting among the ruling class, some injustices happened to be used by one faction to gain popularity. Li Yuying fortunately met a chance like this.

Not long after Li Yuying was jailed an intense political struggle started in the highest ruling class. The newly enthroned emperor Jiajing was a cousin of the late emperor Zhengde. After Jiajing came into power, he was desirous of granting the title Huangkao (Deseased Imperial Father) to his father Zhu Youhang, who was known as Prince Xingxian in his lifetime, and granting the title Huangshukao (Deseased Imperial Uncle) to Emperor Zhengde's father Xiaozong. His intention was