

Compiled by He Jianming

CHINESE LITERATURE

Vol. 1



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We're All on Call



Fan Xiaoqing

The cell phone's alarm began to chirp like a bird before the break of dawn, just as Gui Ping was about to fall asleep. He rolled over, sat up, turned off the annoying tone, and turned on his cell phone. After a few moments, the message indicator began to beep and beep, as always. Gui Ping thought there would be at least five or six messages, but in fact there were more, most having come in after he had pressed the power-off button yesterday, including one from five o'clock in the morning. That last one was no big deal; the caller was always an early bird and often got up before his family when the world outside was still empty. He had sent the message probably because he felt unbearably bored. Of all these messages, only one needed a timely reply.

But before he had time to reply to any of them, Gui Ping found himself in the meeting room, setting his cell phone on vibrate mode. He did not realize there was so much business to deal with, like his messages, until the meeting ended at noon. Before attending another meeting in the afternoon, he had a reception to attend. Thanks to a snap lunch, he managed to squeeze out twenty minutes for himself, slipping into his office and falling into the sofa for a nap, but unexpectedly two messages and three calls came in even during that

short duration. After answering the last call, Gui Ping grew extremely listless. He suddenly realized he had only five minutes left, so he turned off the phone and forced his eyes to close, but his eyelids refused to kiss each other, blinking constantly.

Then he heard Li knocking at his door, "Director Gui! Why can't I get through to your phone? Are you there?"

Gui Ping sat up rather dejected, and said, "Yes. I know there's a meeting scheduled for me."

He picked his cell phone up from the desk, but felt a wave of exasperation rise, forcing him to throw the device back down. But he flung it a little too hard, and the phone slid over the desk and fell onto the floor. Until he picked it up, Gui Ping had not remembered turning it off. He opened it immediately and felt relief that it was intact. As he was walking out with the phone, it rang. It was an old friend. He was hoping Gui Ping could pull some strings with the education bureau for his child's educational prospects. This issue would be a hard nut to crack, because refusal would offend his friend, while agreement could cause trouble. Gui Ping was busy hunting for an appropriate reply, when Li knocked at the door and cried out again: "Director Gui, Director Gui!"

Gui Ping became so irritable that he replied his friend rudely, "I've got a meeting to attend. I'll call you soon."

The friend asked uneasily, "How soon? When can I call you again?"

Gui Ping did hear him but pretended not to, and hung up. To vent his spleen, he turned the phone off again, though it

was a difficult decision to make, then flung it onto the desk, and walked empty-handed into the meeting room.

Following him, Li asked in a voice full of curiosity, "Director Gui, where's your cell phone? Why was it off when I called you just now? Has it been stolen?"

"I wish," Gui Ping answered angrily.

"Recharging?"

"Save your breath."

Li stuck his tongue out and said no more, but could not help still peering at Gui Ping's hand which usually was playing with a cell phone. Now that the hand had suddenly turned up bare, Li felt quite strange.

Once during a rather confidential meeting allowing no cell phones inside, Gui Ping had left his cell phone at the office. For a full half-day he could never have felt more relaxed. From then on, Gui Ping kept it turned off from time to time whenever he got sick of it, pretending he was once again attending a confidential meeting. But his actions invited many complaints and criticisms from superiors as well as subordinates. His superiors queried, "Gui Ping, have you been going abroad again? Are you on a plane all the time? Why are you always power-off?" His subordinates whined, "Director Gui, you're always power-off, so we can't report to you. How can we continue with our work?" All in all, Gui Ping quickly surrendered. He could not pronounce the final verdict on his cell phone, and ultimately chose to keep it on.

Following Gui Ping into the meeting room, Li started talking again: "Director Gui, is your phone being recharged

or did you forget to bring it? Need me to get it for you?" Gui Ping did not know whether to laugh or cry at these surprising words, but Li would not shut up until Gui Ping muttered, "No thanks. Just sit down."

Gui Ping did not have to play a leading role at the meeting, which was different from the morning's meeting, so he could concentrate on his own affairs. On such occasions in the past he would respond to text messages, whisper to callers "I'm in a meeting," or answer a call by sneaking out to the corridor.

He was, however, empty-handed today, so he sat quite relaxed and content in the meeting room, such that he could release a big sigh and feel so free that it was as if all things annoying about his cell phone had vanished.

Not long after this boring meeting began, Gui Ping observed that some of his colleagues around him were hiding their phones under the table, occasionally taking them out for a peek, while others put their phones directly on the table, allowing them occasional glances in order not to miss calls or messages, because vibration mode was not as noticeable as a ring tone. Whenever a message came in, some sentiment, happiness or anxiety would crawl up on the owner's face, then the movement of fingers would follow, and the devoted contact between fingers and phone.

At first Gui Ping bestowed sympathetic stares upon those cell-phone slaves who were under such a tight leash, but gradually he came to feel hints of disquiet growing from his hands to his heart. And then he turned from feeling relaxed to empty, from indifference to anxiety, until he became even

rather distracted and uneasy. His mind had already been stolen by the cell phone.

This scenario was observed by a woman colleague sitting by him, who asked, "Director Gui, are you on your period?"

"No. Just menopausal," he replied.

They laughed together, which did not ease Gui Ping's discomfort. He wondered whether this was an important day, with potentially important calls or messages, whether he had anything important to do or had forgotten something, and moreover, could anything special and unexpected be waiting for him to act? The more he thought, the more issues jumped to mind, until he decided to slip out to the restroom. When he came out of the restroom, he stopped at the door, hesitating briefly. Finally he went directly to the office, instead of back to the meeting room.

Though his office did not appear any different, Gui Ping felt like a century had passed, and not until he spied the cell phone on his desk did he come back down to earth. Unconsciously he turned it on, and messages swarmed in one after another in quick succession, and then a call came in before he even had time to read one message. It was his wife. She cried out worriedly on the phone, "What's wrong? You weren't in your office and you were power-off. Are you in hiding?"

He had no answer, so he replied, "Recharging."

"Don't you have a reserve battery?" his wife inquired.

"Forgot to recharge it," Gui Ping answered.

"Oh? Pigs are flying! Everybody knows you're never power-off. How could you forget?"

Gui Ping curled his lips in self-disdain, and his wife began to chatter on about what she needed him to do. To halt her drawn-out monologue, Gui Ping made an affirmative promise. One more promise would anyway not kill him. Gui Ping always owed a lot of favors, and whenever he paid one back, a new one followed through, so he would never be able to pay them all off anyway.

Returning to the meeting room with his cell phone, Gui Ping began to scan the messages.

"Done recharging?" the same woman colleague asked.

"How do you know I was recharging?"

"You always have your cell phone with you, so you must have been recharging. It's inconceivable that you forgot to bring it."

"No, I left it in the office deliberately. It's been annoying me."

"Annoying? But you've brought it back. You can't be without it."

"You really think I dare not turn it off?"

"It's no big deal, but you're likely to turn it on soon enough."

They talked on until their increasingly loud voices even drew the attention of some superiors on the dais. Able to read and reply messages again, Gui Ping found his mental calm returning. He felt at ease once more.

But before he could finish replying, a call came in. Gui Ping took a look, only to see an unfamiliar number. Gui Ping set the phone down on the meeting's pile of paper to cushion the vibrating and left it there, and only after the vibrating stopped did he feel relief. Anyway, nobody could hear the



vibrating in the meeting room. However, another wave of vibrations began before long, more durable and patient, and apparently needing an answer. Finally, when a third vibrating storm arrived Gui Ping had no choice but to answer. He lowered himself into his chair a little, covered the receiver, and whispered, "I'm in a meeting."

The caller responded in a deafening voice, "Ha ha! Gui Ping, I knew you'd answer my call. I was just thinking I'd have to turn to others if you refused to answer, when you came on. Ha ha!"

Her shrill voice tortured Gui Ping's ear, and was even heard by his woman colleague, who said, "Wow, a soprano!"

Though he had said he was in a meeting, the soprano started on her long story as if Gui Ping was always ready to listen, which forced him to sneak out again with the phone. In the corridor Gui Ping raised his voice to say, "I'm in a meeting. Superiors are present, and I'm not supposed to leave so frequently."

"What do you mean, frequently? You didn't answer until I called a third time, so you've left just once at most."

You selfish wretch, I wouldn't survive if I answered every call, he thought to himself, but dared not utter it out loud, knowing the soprano to be so unbearably talkative. "Get on with your business," he urged her. The soprano continued, and went on and on so much so that Gui Ping could no longer bear it and interrupted: "Enough. I'm in a meeting. I'll do it after the meeting is over."

On hearing his words the soprano was satisfied, and before

hanging up, added, "Call me when you get it done." Gui Ping gave an affirmative.

Though she had hung up, Gui Ping felt full of regret, for if he had not insisted on answering her call, she could have been skipped. Why could he not have desisted from taking her third call? She was not on his contact list because he did not like the soprano, yet she had got hold of him by chance, which now forced him to do her this favor. Gui Ping was about to return with the phone to the meeting room, when Li sneaked out. Seeing Gui looking so remorseful, Li asked, "What happened, Director Gui?"

Gui Ping waved the phone to him and said, "It's so tedious." Li thought Gui Ping was about to throw the phone so he reached out for it but caught nothing.

"On or off, neither is viable..." Gui Ping sighed.

Li looked at him carefully, and then offered a suggestion, "Director Gui, there's another option."

Gui Ping threw a skeptical glare at him and asked, "Either on or off, how could there be another choice?"

Li smiled furtively, "A good clever move invented by some deadbeat."

"What's that?"

"Out of service range."

"How's that possible? We're not in a forest or a desert."

"You can still try it. Pull the card out of the phone when it rings, put the battery back and turn it on again, and you'll be out of range: 'Sorry! The subscriber you dialed cannot be reached at the moment, please try again later.'"

Gui Ping could not have been any happier, for he could now choose any moment to be "on call" or out of range.

The next day, one of Gui Ping's superiors caught hold of him and censured him severely: "I have numerous problems, but you've been avoiding me. Were you in a remote mountain village?"

"No, I wasn't in the hills, I was here at work."

"But why did calls to you say 'no service'?"

"I'm in range. I'm on call."

"What the devil? Is your cell phone an antique or something? Why do calls to you always say, 'no service'? If you're always going to be out of service, then just stay out forever."

Gui Ping grew fearful and never dared go out of service range from then on.

Of course Li could not divert Gui Ping's curses, but he still tried to seek solutions to Gui Ping's problem. He advised, "Director Gui, why don't you try this? You add all the phone numbers you could possibly receive onto your contact list, and then you know who's calling and can decide whether to answer it or not."

Li's advice was accepted again. At the next meeting, Gui Ping took the time to add all the numbers he could get onto his contact list: important ones, unimportant ones, ones not worth answering, and undesirables. When he had almost done it, the meeting was called to an end. The phone rang just as he was walking out. Seeing it was a number he did not need to answer, he put the phone into his pocket.

What Li had suggested was truly a good and practical method. He classed his contacts into several groups, so he could easily decide whether he should answer a call. If the incoming call was a strange number not on his contact list, he would skip it, for the caller was certainly not directly related to him.

He saved himself a lot of trouble over the ensuing days. Most people calling for his help knew him as a yes man, so they rang whenever they needed him. Now that he was not available, they turned to others for help. In the future he would avert blame by saying "Sorry, I didn't know it was you," or "I was in a meeting" – saving a whole heap of trouble.

However, this period of leisure did not last long. One day right before a meeting, somebody patted him on the shoulder. It was the executive vice-director of the Organization Department, which gave him quite a start.

"Director Gui, how are you doing?" The vice-director said with a smile.

Gui Ping felt greatly flattered for one second, but in the next he grew suspicious, as the vice-director was not that familiar. So he probed deeper by saying, "Great, thank you so much."

"Well, I know you're busy, but you've ignored my calls, several times."

Gui Ping was astonished, and replied, his blood pressure rising rapidly, "Sorry, but... but sir, I don't remember you calling."

"It just means I'm not a VIP to you, so I've not made it on

your contact list.” Knowing Gui Ping was worried, he patted Gui Ping’s shoulder again to make him relax, and said, “Calm down. It’s not a promotion, or I wouldn’t be calling you directly.”

Gui Ping smiled, embarrassed.

“Don’t worry. You didn’t miss anything. I called for your help. An acquaintance of mine just started out at the Development and Reform Commission so I wondered whether you could help him. You’re the director of the office, very powerful, and someone fresh would show promise if you could give him a leg up.”

“Please, which department is he in?” Gui Ping asked.

“Forget it. He left days ago, so nothing more to do with you. That’s so typical of young men, so let it be.”

The vice-director walked into the meeting room, side by side with Gui Ping, talking to him, and this scene was witnessed by many. Later, somebody told Gui Ping, “You two are so close. Good for you.”

Gui Ping felt much regret at having missed out on such a good opportunity, but how could he predict the vice-director would call him directly? To admit that he never answered strange numbers would also be quite wrong, and of course he had to rectify matters, so consequently he opened the directory listing the numbers of all government cadres, and added all those numbers onto his cell phone’s contact list. Luckily the phone’s memory was big enough to accommodate far more numbers.

Gui Ping felt great relief now, for on the one hand he had

escaped many a needless hitch, and on the other hand he would not miss any opportunities. Though he did not receive any more calls from his superiors for quite a long while, he did not think it a waste of time, because he believed in adequate and timely preparation.

Days later, a university reunion was convened. For so many years some of the classmates had come and gone, and now only one solitary table was enough for those left in the city who could be present that day. Most took their cell phones out while sitting down, and put them in a noticeable place between the cups and plates. Gui Ping didn't. He hid his cell phone in his pants' hip pocket and set it to ring tone and vibrating mode, so that in the noisy ambience his butt would feel the vibration if the rings were not loud enough. This was really a sound act. Like him, several circumspect young women did not place their phones on the table, but they kept them close to their bodies or left their handbags open so that any ringing could be heard clearly, and they could enjoy the reunion, totally at peace.

This was an exciting day for everybody, and there was a common topic of open and secret university love affairs. Though sometimes leaving painful and even torturous memories, love affairs could turn sweet after the test of time. Both groups, participants and bystanders, were immersing themselves in the subtle sorrows and joys brought about by time.

Then they moved from the past to the present. Charlie is having an affair, John's wife is so beautiful, and who is