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Pilgrimage to Peking and Other Stories

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**A Thesis
in
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of
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for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage to Peking and Other Stories

Jia-lin Peng

This is a collection of short stories based on events which took place in China, where I was an unwilling witness to many outrages against humanity and to a great wave of suffering. The stories fall loosely into what is described in the West as the realistic-naturalist tradition. However, I have tried to find a balance which would allow me to give a realistic accounting of the times, but which would still give me access to the humour and imaginative liberties of the Chinese tradition of story-telling.

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Pilgrimage to Peking

On August 18, 1966, Chairman Mao received millions of Red Guards in Tien An Men Square. Soon after, additional news reached our senior middle school: the Great Leader was going to receive even more. Red Guards from all over China would be able to take a free trip to Peking.

All of the students were ecstatic. Half a year earlier, a model worker had come to our school to give a lecture. Almost a hundred students had gathered around him, vying with one another to touch his hand—a hand that Chairman Mao had once shaken. And now, at last, we too would be able to see Chairman Mao in person.

I cried for joy, perhaps too soon, for my tears turned bitter at once. The head of Red Guards in our class told me I was not worthy to see Chairman Mao because my parents were capitalists. According to revolutionary jargon, I was a "son-of-a-bitch."

That night I went home stone-faced. It was dinnertime and my parents were at the table. Unable to face them, I went straight to my bedroom and locked myself in it. At the time, such scenes were all too frequent. As usual, my mother tapped on the door. "Are you all right?" she said. "What's wrong? Come on now. Come have your dinner. Mother will give you your favourite. I'll open a can of shrimp. All right?"

"No! I don't want to eat a thing!"

Then I heard my father approaching the door. He hesitated a moment before saying, "You should eat, no matter what happens, or you'll get sick."

"Who cares!" I shouted. "Just leave me alone!"

At a lost for words, my parents went away. What shame, I thought. How I hated my parents! Why couldn't my father have been a worker or a poor peasant? Why had my mother given birth to me? I dreamed of going to Tibet and becoming a herdsman, never to see my parents and their shrimp again. I swore to myself that I would stay a bachelor forever, to avoid having children who'd be called sons-of-bitches as I was.

Some two or three hours had passed when I heard a knock at my door. I didn't answer. The knocking went on.

"Who is it?" I said at last. I jumped out of bed, ready to flare up again.

"It's me, Tang Da-ming."

I opened the door and we embraced. Then I started sobbing once more.

Tang was my very best friend. Although we had been schoolmates since primary school, we hadn't become real friends until recently. In the past—that is, until three months earlier—he had been too much above me. His father, a playwright and Party member, had been the head of the cultural bureau of our city; his mother had been a celebrated actress. Tang himself had been a member of the Communist Youth League, the top student of his class, not to mention being tall, strong and handsome. However, three months earlier, one of his father's plays had been

condemned; his father was branded a reactionary-revisionist. The persecution soon drove his mother to madness. Tang Da-ming inevitably became a son-of-a-bitch. His former friends all turned up their noses at him. And those with bad family backgrounds, whom he had formerly looked down upon, turned their backs on him. For my part, I was particularly easygoing; being an only child and a short skinny boy, I was glad to find such a tall, strong and wise companion.

"Nothing can stop us from going to see Chairman Mao!" Tang said firmly.

"How can we?" I said. "They have forbidden us to go."

"There's no need to show our papers at the station. All we have to do is avoid our enemies."

"Brilliant idea!" I patted him on the back. When I switched on the light, I noticed his eyes were moist and bloodshot. He shouldered a satchel—all set to go.

But we decided to wait until the next morning to leave for the train station. That night, Tang Da-ming stayed over with me. In our excitement, we both could barely sleep. Before daybreak, we went to the bus terminal. I also brought along a heavy satchel containing necessities for travel: some pancakes my mother had prepared for us, and six cans of food, three of shrimp and the rest of beef. We were the first to arrive at the bus terminal. But soon a huge, sprawling crowd—mostly of students—had gathered. After waiting a good hour and a half, we saw the first bus appear. We all fought our way aboard. Tang and I were lucky enough to get seats.

Once we were all underway, a girl standing next to my seat addressed me in an accent typical of the Zhuang minority.

"What's your family origin?" she demanded.

"Capitalist." The word slipped from my lips before I could think.

"Get up!" she commanded. I obeyed at once, fearing that she would order me to go home.

"Move aside!" she said. Then she planted herself in my seat. Thank heaven it was all she wanted.

Tang cast a nervous stare my way. The other passengers also stared. I blushed like a fool. Hanging my head, I examined the girl out of the corner of my eye. Her gaping mouth revealed the yellow teeth of a donkey; she wore a baggy indigo coat with a row of buttons down one side. I'd actually submitted to the commands of this country girl! I called myself a fool and a coward. Still, I was too unnerved to challenge her.

"What's your own family origin?" said another girl to the country bumpkin. This one spoke perfect Mandarin, and was dressed in a full Red Guard Uniform. The material and width of the armband generally revealed the rank of the bearer's family. This particular girl's was silk—and almost twenty centimeters wide.

"Poor peasant," snapped the country girl. "And what's yours?" She tilted her head to one side, glaring up at the inquirer.

The girl in the Red Guard uniform ignored the country girl's question. "Get up!" she commanded.

"But my father is Party Secretary of the commune. What about yours?"

"That's none of your business. Get up!"

"Her father is high cadre," said another girl. "Get up!"

Miss Poor Peasant surrendered the seat with a snort. The surrounding passengers burst into laughter. Even I couldn't keep from grinning.

"What's so funny?" Flushing, Miss Poor Peasant cast me a burning glare.

Fortunately, we had just arrived at the station. Hundreds of students were there already, and we stared around like timid mice. Things could have been worse: there were *dazibao* posters on the walls, forbidding sons-of-bitches to go to Peking; but none of the schoolmates we feared were in sight. We approached the information desk where a stern young woman sat on duty, embroidering a portrait of Chairman Mao.

"Serve the people," said Tang. One had to preface any enquiry with a quotation from Chairman Mao; otherwise no information was given. "Could you please tell us where to board one of the special trains for Peking?"

"It is right to rebel," the girl began. "Where do you usually catch a train? On a railway platform, I guess."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Who knows!" She returned to her embroidery.

"When does the first train leave?" asked Tang.

"How should I know?" said the girl. "If you want to go to Peking, just wait like everybody else!"

Turning away, we spied three boys with Red Guard armbands. They were pressing towards us, guided by the country girl who had bullied me on the bus.

"Hey! You son-of-a-bitch!" shouted one of the boys at me. "Get out of here!"

Tang tried to plead for my sake. "Let us explain —"

"Not another word from you!" said the girl. "No doubt you are a son-of-a-bitch as well!" Such a charge was, of course, inspired by her acute class instinct.

In no time they had forced us out of the station and left us cowering in the street. Da-ming stood stock still, and his face was pale. He had an empty look in his eyes. Though he said not a single word to reproach me, his silence left me all the more with a burden of guilt. I wanted desperately to apologize, but simply didn't know the right words to say. I suddenly understood the depth of my father's shame, and his inability to console me.

At last, out of mercy, Tang broke the silence. "Nothing can stop us from going to see Chairman Mao!" His eyes were shining; his fist was pressed to his heart. "We'll march north along the rails till we come to another station. If we have to, we'll march to the next station after that—and even the next! Somehow we'll catch a train to Peking!"

"Brilliant idea!" I said. No matter that the nearest station was forty kilometers away. To atone for my sins, I was prepared to do anything.

Walking along the railroad ties, we were forced to adopt an awkward length for our steps; since we'd barely slept all night,

we were soon exhausted. The sun climbed higher and higher. The railroad bed grew burning hot, as it seemed, to the point of smoking. The grass alongside the tracks drooped motionless. Sweat sticky as paste covered our bodies; our throats burned, our dry tongues were bitter. My brand new shoes of stiff leather tormented my feet. Yet we struggled on.

The sun had long disappeared when at last we jammed ourselves aboard a train. The only place we could find was standing-room, right next to the toilet. Soon we were thankful to have even that, for at every station, newcomers fought their way in through windows and doors.

It was on the second day that Tang and I, along with three boys and two girls, were pressed into the toilet and trapped for ten hours. The air was rank with excrement; the fumes made us sick to the point of delirium. One fellow, from halfway back in the car, persuaded the crowd to pass him over their heads; then he elbowed his way inside the toilet, only to find that his labour was in vain. He began to gag and suddenly vomited at the door. The clothes of people nearby, including Tang and me, were splattered.

Whenever the train made stops between stations—which could last for five minutes or several hours—hordes of boys and girls flooded out the windows. Baring their buttocks, they relieved themselves a few meters away from the train. In towns, on station platforms, we were all permitted free food and water, but to get it we had to risk being left behind by the train. The food my mother had given Tang and me was our salvation.

All in all, one might call the trip an ordeal; yet we endured it without regret, because we were on our way to Peking to see Chairman Mao! Da-ming and I, certainly as well as many others who were called sons-of-bitches, thought that we had more to gain from this journey than anyone else: we longed to offer our undying loyalty to the great leader to prove that we belonged to him only—not to our evil parents—and to prove that our love for him was second to none. Just as a child wronged by his brother turns to his mother for consolation, we wanted to turn to Chairman Mao.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that our train at last rolled into Peking Station. Thousands of boys and girls erupted through windows and doors. Using handkerchiefs, sleeves and the fronts of their coats, they scrubbed their soiled faces. All the girls combed their hair; a few even changed their coats for clean ones, turning out their white shirt-collars. Every face in the crowd beamed with happiness. I remembered a few sentences from a local newspaper, written by a boy who had seen Chairman Mao on August 18: "We were finally in Peking—the sanctuary—the centre of world revolution. And we would soon see Chairman Mao, the red sun in the hearts of all mankind! We were the happiest boys and girls in the world!"

Tang Da-ming scraped the remaining stains of vomit from his clothes, then fished a little wooden box out of his satchel. Inside, he'd kept a brand new button of Mao. He unpinned the old metal one he'd been wearing, stashed it inside the box, and proudly pinned the new one to his jacket. It was rectangular, made of

bright red plastic, with a golden portrait of Mao, and his quotation, "Serve the people." Tang confessed that he had traded his favourite stamp album for this button.

Together we plodded towards the exit. I turned to see Lin Wei-biao, one of Tang's classmates. Back in the days before our school had suspended classes because of the Cultural Revolution, it was common knowledge that Lin, rather than looking at the teacher, had always kept his eyes glued on a beautiful girl named Wang Ping. But Wang Ping openly despised Lin; what's worse, she always had her own eyes glued on Tang! Furthermore, Tang had also looked down upon Lin Wei-biao, who was from the Zhuang nationality and spoke Chinese with a strong accent. Tang had frequently made him a laughingstock by mimicking the way Lin spoke. On top of all that, Lin's father had worked for my own father in the years before Liberation. Lin Wei-biao consequently declared that he was "filled with class hatred and national hostility" for Tang and me.

"How dare you come here, you ... you sons-of-bitches!" Lin roared. Tang and I moved aside to escape the attention of the crowd. But Lin continued to hound us.

"Don't you dare walk out of this station," he said. "Turn around and get on the next train going back home."

"Please give us a chance." Tang had to resort to begging with this bony weakling—even though Lin was no better than alone. His only company, Wei Feng-nian, stood aside as a neutral bystander. Both Tang and I knew that Wei was a soft-hearted fellow.

"Please," Tang repeated.

"No! I'll see you in hell before I'll let you stay here," said Lin. "Go home, you...you sons-of-bitches!"

"We know we're at fault," said Tang. "We shouldn't have come; but since we're already here, please let us have a chance to see Chairman Mao. We'll go home as soon as the rally is over; then we'll gladly accept any punishment from you." Tang looked earnestly into Lin's face.

Wei Feng-nian also cast an interceding glance at Lin for our benefit. But Lin was untouched. "Nothing doing!" he said. "Don't say another word! I command you to leave Peking this minute!"

"Suppose we don't?" Tang retorted.

"Then I'll make you aware of the iron fist of the proletarian dictatorship." At once, Lin punched me in the stomach. I tripped backward.

Tang Da-ming pounced at Lin and grappled him by the collar. Tang's face was white, his lips trembling. He couldn't speak. His anger infected me; I was seized with a wild impulse to fight.

Now Lin's face was flushed and beaded with sweat. He stuttered, "You...you...you..."

Wei Feng-nian struggled to separate Tang and Lin, urging Tang and me: "Go away! What are you waiting for?" Just the same, it was too late. A small gang of boys in Red Guard uniforms had surrounded us. One of them asked, "What's all this commotion?"

Lin Wei-biao turned cocky again. "They are sons-of-bitches," he said. "The tall one's father is a reactionary-revisionist; and

this...this dwarf's father is a capitalist. When I commanded them to leave Peking, they attacked me."

Before we could offer an explanation, one Red Guard (who looked even younger than us) unclasped his broad, heavy waist-belt. He dealt both of us a blow on the legs.

"Damn you, sons-of-bitches!" he cursed. "Chairman Mao wants to receive us, the Red Guards, so that we can share the revolutionary experience. You sons-of-bitches not only exploit his graciousness—taking a recreational tour—you also try to stir up a riot in Peking. We Red Guards of the capital will not tolerate the likes of you! Come, come with us!"

Overwhelmed by the ferocity of these boys, I could not help but tremble.

Wei Feng-nian patted the young Red Guard on the shoulder. With a condescending smile, he pulled the boy aside. He whispered something to him. After a moment, Wei returned to Tang and me. He put on as straight a face as he could and reprimanded us: "You sons-of-bitches should know your place. You're not supposed to argue with others. Don't you know that...? Go now! Go to Tien An Men Square; admit your crime and beg punishment from the portrait of Chairman Mao!"

"But," the Red Guard of the capital broke in. "You must be back here within two hours. And then you must leave Peking directly."

"We'll follow you," Lin Wei-biao added. "If you don't return here within two hours, we'll settle with you." Suddenly, his small

eyes burned with greed. "You're not worthy to wear a button of Chairman Mao!" he shouted at Tang. "Hand it over!"

Tang Da-ming's eyes kindled with fury; he gnawed his lower lip. With trembling fingers, he unpinned the button. Lin seized it out of his hand.

Before Tang and I walked away, another capital Red Guard dealt us each a departing blow on the legs.

We marched straight down Chang An Street to the Square. The smarting bruises left by the capital Red Guards had taken away my longing for 'consolation'. It seemed we were watched on all sides by invisible hostile eyes. I lost all curiosity, staring down at the pavement—even though this was the very first time I had seen Peking in my life. All at once, I longed to be with my mother and father. I longed to go back home. I imagined how Mamma would have treated the burning bruises on my legs, and the festering blisters on my feet. Tears welled up in my eyes. I wanted to tell Tang, "Let's go home, right now." But I changed my mind when I saw the determination in his walk. It would all depend on him; I could only follow.

After walking twenty minutes in silence, we arrived at the Square. We went straight to the Tien An Men Rostrum, halting before the Golden Water Bridges to gape at the portrait of Chairman Mao on the wall. Tears flooded from my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. Tang Da-ming took *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* from his satchel. He pressed it against his heart. Then he stood at attention for more than ten minutes. Afterwards, returning the little red book to his satchel, he took

out the old metallic button. He held it flat in his palm and gazed at it. All at once, he unbuttoned his jacket and shirt, bared his chest and pinned the button to the skin over his heart. Blood trickled from the wound. While I watched, aghast, he buttoned his clothes up. Then he bowed three times slowly and stiffly at the portrait. At last, he turned to me.

"Shall we go home?" he said softly.

I nodded. All the way to the station, we both remained speechless.

Throughout the three-day journey back to our city, we scarcely exchanged a word. Most of the seats on the train were empty. Who else would have left Peking without seeing Chairman Mao? Tang removed the button of Mao from his chest soon after the train had rolled out of the station. We sat face to face. For most of the ride, Tang gazed aimlessly out the window, holding his chin in his hand, his elbow propped on the little table between us.

I stared at my companion: his noble brow, his high-bridged nose and the sharp chin with a black birthmark, all remained just the same as a few months ago. But his cheeks were pale, his eyes dull and bloodshot. Perhaps, I told myself, Tang would never be his old self again. I felt indignant and angry. Questions flooded through my mind, challenging what I had learned and accepted without second thought from the authorities. However, a deep-rooted fear held me fast, and kept me from going further with this line of thinking.

The sun was just going down, three days later, when we finally reached our city. I was exhausted, yet I couldn't bear to go home. What was I supposed to tell my parents? I suggested that we should go to a restaurant. Tang Da-ming agreed.

At the restaurant, we ordered six dishes and two soups—enough to feed four men. Tang went to the liquor counter and bought a bottle of potent rice spirits. Neither he nor I had ever before tasted alcohol. He filled a small cup for each of us. Then he leaned back his head, pouring a whole cupful down his throat. At once, he choked and spewed it all on the floor. Still coughing, he refilled his cup, sipping slowly but steadily, knitting his eyebrows.

Now I tried a gulp of the spirits. It was bitter; it burned my throat. Its taste made me shudder, but I kept sipping until my cheeks began to burn. In no time, my heart began to beat fast. I was filled with wild impulses—now an impulse to weep, the next minute to howl, or even run wild. As I drained the second cup, what I saw became a little misty and seemed unreal. As if I were drifting away from myself, all my fears dissipated; I tried to answer some questions which had been haunting me the last few days. Of course, I stood by the Cultural Revolution wholeheartedly; it had been launched by our great leader, Chairman Mao, to rid Humanity of all wrongs—to liberate all oppressed peoples throughout the world. But would I be allowed to join the revolution? Or would I be categorized with the targets of the revolution? Why not? Countless people—Party and non-Party members, people with good and bad backgrounds—had

become reactionaries overnight. Even Liu Shao-qi and Deng Xiao-ping might at any moment be heaped among the targets of the revolution. Undoubtedly, everyone but Chairman Mao and his close comrade-in-arms, Lin Biao, faced this danger. In fact, if I dared put this revelation into words, I myself would be an instant reactionary. There was no fate worse than to be a reactionary. I understood the meaning of Proletarian Dictatorship: I should no longer think. Suspend every thought. The only thing I could do was drink. Of course! No thinking, only drinking.

"Down the hatch!" I said, the cup in my hands, a grin on my face. "Bottoms up!" said Tang. The bottoms were really up.

A patrolling propaganda car passed by in the street, blaring "A Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party"—a song set to words from Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung. It drew my attention outside where the facades of all the stores were painted in red. One could hardly distinguish a barber's from a tailor's. On a whitewashed yard wall was painted in huge red characters: "Comrade Mao Tse-tung is the greatest Marxist of our time; he is much much greater than Lenin or Stalin." In the hands of passersby were placards bearing Mao's words. What were those people thinking about? Were they thinking at all? Didn't they want to drink? If not, they were even more foolish than I. I lowered my gaze to my cup. Then, raising my eyes, I spied a plaster statue of Mao on a table against the far wall. He was watching over our little dinner party. I imagined he was waving his hand at us. All of a sudden, I found the whole situation extremely funny; I thought of making a joke. But when I looked

at Tang Da-ming, the joke evaporated instantly. An ominous foreboding sank into my heart. Tang was neither eating nor drinking; he only gazed into space, as if towards some illusion.

"Hey, Da-ming," I said. "Are you all right?" My tongue had become inflexible.

"I'm just fine," he answered. "And you?"

I couldn't say I was any more sane than Tang at that moment. Just then my stomach began to turn. I bolted across the restaurant to the bathroom. Beyond the door, I heaved my whole dinner into the toilet.

Staggering back to our table, I found Tang's seat abandoned. Turning, I spied him across the room, kneeling before the statue of Chairman Mao.

"Oh, beloved Chairman Mao!" he cried. His voice was slurred, but the words were clear enough. "At last I see you!" I was scared sober. Before I could do anything to stop him, he stood up. "Oh, beloved Chairman Mao, I swear to you: I will follow you till the day I die... to carry on the revolution... to turn the upside-down world right-side-up!" He turned Mao's statue upside-down on the table. It tumbled to the floor with a crash. The people in whole room were scared stiff, then a few men dashed over to Tang and seized him, but more customers had decided to leave the restaurant immediately. Almost unconsciously, I slipped off among them.

I didn't feel ashamed to leave Da-ming alone until I was half-way home. And even then I did not have the courage to return to see what would have happen to Tang Da-ming. I was preoccupied

with my own safety. Would he say something to implicate me in his crime? Suddenly I remembered leaving my satchel in the restaurant. Would it give the police a clue to track me down?

At home, before I could say a word, my parents sensed something wrong. They kept interrogating me until I broke down and confided my whole predicament to them.

They did all they could to put my mind at rest—to persuade me that I had nothing to do with Tang's crime. Yet incredibly, my father's hair turned grey in a single week. Late one night, I saw my mother kneeling in front of a little table in a corner of the sitting room. On the table, there had once been a statue of Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy; but now a bust of Mao occupied her place. I knew that in fact my mother was begging the exiled Guanyin to give me her blessing, and to bless poor Tang Da-ming. For a long time, I woke with nightmares every night, trembling and drenched with sweat; then I'd secretly weep for Tang, for my parents, and for myself.

To be sure, Tang Da-ming had gone insane. Just the same, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. After a time I found his name on a court bulletin; hundreds of copies were pasted on walls all over the city. Tang's name was the second on a list of five. The first, a rightist, had been executed for "writing reactionary diaries to flagrantly attack the great leader Chairman Mao Tse-tung and his close comrade-in-arms Lin Biao." The third, a retired railway worker, got fifteen years for casting fifteen metal Mao buttons into spoons.

I was lucky. No one implicated me in Tang Da-ming's "crime." Furthermore, it wasn't long before sons-of-bitches like ourselves were officially endowed with a more hopeful title—"still educable offspring." We were allowed to join the Red Guards, to visit Peking for Chairman Mao's rallies, even to visit other cities to share the revolutionary experience. At last, I did exploit the chance to take a free recreational tour. I visited all the major cities in China, all except Peking. This was my own small statement of defiance, though perhaps none but I knew its meaning.

Four years have passed since that disasterous evening; Tang Da-ming is still serving his sentence. My father died of pancreatic cancer. And in 1969, like most my fellow students, I was sent to the countryside to be a peasant. But only a few months later, it was found that I had Hepatitis B. After spending a few months in hospital, I was sent back to my mother. Since then I've been recuperating at home.

The doctors have told me that there is still no effective treatment for the disease, and that I will never totally recover from it. So I don't expect a decent job and a happy life, though at least my health condition ensures that I will be allowed to permanently leave the countryside, where living conditions are primitive. I feel, at the age of 20, that I am only lingering in this world, waiting for a premature death.

I have never visited Da-ming. This is not only because I feel too ashamed to face him, having deserted him in such a cowardly

Deformed Womb

Since the break Zhao-di hadn't had a moment to catch her breath. She had watered the vegetables in the family plot, washed clothes and fetched drinking water from the well one kilometer from her house. Now, while pouring the last bucket of water into the large earthenware vessel in the kitchen, she hesitated before asking her mother-in-law what to do next.

Her mother-in-law was feeding the pigs in one corner of the kitchen. Suddenly, the tiny old woman burst into a loud curse: "Damn you! You only know how to fight for food. You eat and eat, but never whelp!"

Zhao-di held her breath, as if it was she whom the old woman cursed.

"Sell those chickens at the fair, two and seventy a *jin*," her mother-in-law snapped, without bothering to turn to Zhao-di. "And buy two *jin* of salt and ten packs of matches. Then come back as soon as possible. There is still a lot of work to do."

There were ten chickens, held in two bamboo cages. Without any delay, Zhao-di carried them away on a shoulder-pole. To reach the fair, she would have to travel ten kilometers along a hilly footpath.

Outside her village Zhao-di stopped to look around. No one else was going to the fair at the moment. She felt relieved because she was always ill-at-ease with the other villagers.

Zhao-di was a thin short woman of twenty-five. She had small eyes, a narrow brow, a flat nose, high cheekbones and a wide

mouth with thick lips. Her hair was cropped short. Her eyebrows were shaven into two thin curves. The woman wore an indigo blouse which was just long enough to cover her navel, and her black pants were broad and four inches above the ankles. Her feet were bare with the toes widedspread—the result of walking and working for years in bare feet.

Her features were typical among the women in this remote mountain area, where the same clans had lived for many generations and many people looked alike. Her dress was in the most common style—not only did most young women here wear clothes of the same colour and design, but so had their mothers and grandmothers in their younger days. In short, Zhao-di looked as common as a blade of wild grass on the roadside, which a passerby wouldn't think of looking at twice. However, if you observed her, you would find the expression in her eyes far from common. Her eyes were so blank that she might not even notice you were watching her for quite some time. Once she realized she was being watched, her eyes, like those of a scared mouse, would turn aside timidly.

Zhao-di was tortured by fear and worry. More than six years had passed since her wedding, yet there was no sign that she would bear a child.

Zhao-di's husband, Fang Chuan-zong, was, like herself, an uneducated and simple peasant. He desperately wanted sons. He consulted his fellow peasants as to how they had fathered sons. Some of them tried to answer seriously, but most just wanted to

tease him, teaching him dozens of "secret methods." The first man said that he should make love to his wife during her period under a full moon. The second one said the right time to have sexual intercourse was midway between two periods. The third fellow suggested that Chuan-zong hang his wife upside-down for fifteen minutes after lovemaking. The fourth told him that it was not enough to make love from the front, but also from behind.

To get the real point of the next man's advice, Chuan-zong had to rack his brains.

"Spend some time watching carefully how pigs mate," the man said to Chuan-zong. "Then imitate them as much as you can. A hog can make a sow bear many piglets at a time. There must be something worth learning from them."

Chuan-zong tried all the "secret methods" one by one. Zhao-di didn't like those fanciful ideas at all. Since her girlhood, she had been taught that sex was shameful and dirty. Furthermore, her husband had never cared a bit about her feelings. But she knew that it was a wife's duty to spread her legs for her husband, and that it was the main function of a marriage to reproduce. Therefore, she did what her husband asked of her, no matter how embarrassing, painful or disgusting it was.

Chuan-zong's mother also did everything she could to get a grandson. She sought folk prescriptions which were known to make women bear children. Following these, she stripped bark, dug roots and picked flowers, made tea from them which she gave to her son or daughter-in-law to drink. She burned incense sticks and prayed to deities and Buddhist idols. She saved every

coin she could to consult sorceresses and geomancers. Some called for magic figures painted on red paper to be pasted on the doors and the young couple's mosquito net; their bed was moved to a new position; the kitchen stove was torn down and rebuilt in a certain way; and the direction of the yard gate was changed.

Even Chuan-zong's father, who had been dead for over twenty years, was raised from his grave to join in these efforts. His bones were moved to a new site chosen by a geomancer. Anyone buried in this new spot, the geomancer said, was bound to have at least two grandsons.

However, Zhao-di's waist never got an inch thicker. Eventually, the couple went to the commune hospital. A doctor told them that Zhao-di had a deformed uterus, and could never carry a baby. The couple refused to believe the doctor. They went to the county hospital. But the gynecologists there reached the same diagnosis.

Like most Chinese, the family inherited a belief with their blood: it is the worst tragedy to die without a son. In ancient times a sage had warned, "Spirits without descendants go hungry!" And in modern times, one of the most vicious curses still was: "You will die sonless!"

To make matters worse, Chuan-zong's grandfather and father were both only sons. When Chuan-zong's father died in his early thirties, he left only Chuan-zong, who was five years old at the time.

Chuan-zong's father's young widow raised her son singlehandedly. The little boy was always sick. At times, she

didn't even know where to get food for the next day. Some people tried to persuade her to remarry to get out of this difficult position, but she stayed a widow. More than once, she lost all courage and was on the point of suicide, but decided at the last moment to continue struggling. Her son would suffer greatly either from her death or her remarriage; his family name, Fang, might have to be changed, bringing the family line to an end. All the spirits of the ancestors, including her late husband's, would go hungry forever. They would certainly take revenge upon her, before or after her death.

As soon as Chuan-zong could work in the fields, mother and son began, bit by bit, to save money for Chuan-zong's marriage.

When her son was finally married, the mother felt released from her duty. Now it was her daughter-in-law's turn to extend the family line. But Zhao-di had turned out to be sterile. All the old woman's labours were lost. She herself would become a hungry ghost.

Chuan-zong didn't care about life after death. There was too much for him to worry about in the immediate future. Whenever he saw the aged childless people in the village, leading miserable and dreary lives, Chuan-zong could not help asking himself whom he would depend on in his old age. Who would take care of him, gather firewood and fetch drinking water for him?

Chuan-zong and his mother considered Zhao-di the cause of their misfortune. Chuan-zong beat her whenever he had an excuse; his mother's sharp tongue scarcely gave Zhao-di a moment's peace. Yet Chuan-zong didn't want to divorce her. He

was over thirty and poor, neither smart nor strong. It would be impossible to find another woman.

In their eyes, Zhao-di now was no more than a piece of livestock. "I make her toil like an ox in the daytime," Chuan-zong boasted. "And I ride her like a mare at night."

Zhao-di submitted meekly to the abuse. She considered divorce to be a great disgrace. Moreover, she had nowhere else to go. Her parents were dead. And who would marry a sterile divorcee?

Zhao-di had grown up in another village. Here she had no friends. In fact, the women in the neighbourhood either looked down upon her, or paid her no notice since they already had too much to worry about. Zhao-di herself didn't like to talk to the other women because she felt inferior. She even avoided meeting old friends from her home town, because they would invariably ask, "How many children do you have?"

Zhao-di walked along the winding path through the hills. The village in which she lived and suffered was long out of sight but the fear and worry were not out of her mind. A haunting question emerged again. Would there be an end to her misery? She yearned to be among strangers, who would treat her as an equal being. She quickened her pace to get to the fair.

The fair was located in the same small town as the commune administration. Every Sunday, peasants from twenty kilometers around came here to sell agricultural products, such as pork, chickens, ducks, eggs, peanuts, vegetables, tobacco, and to buy

daily necessities such as matches, salt, soap, clothes and lamp kerosene.

There was only one street with about fifteen stores in the town. At fair time, sellers would sit along both sides of the street with their goods in front of them. Buyers would stroll between the sellers. Now and then, they would stop to select what they wanted, and to bargain with the sellers. Usually, there were some buyers from the nearest city, seventy kilometers away. They came to this out-of-the-way town to get certain things which were comparatively cheap or which were hard to get in the city.

When Zhao-di arrived, the fair was just at its peak. The whole place was bustling with noise and activity. She found a space to put down the cages, paid ten *fen* to a tax collector who was patrolling the market, then sat down on her shoulder pole, waiting for customers. A few minutes later, two young men stopped before her. They were not local people. Both of them wore blue work clothes and sunglasses. On the taller man's jacket was a white symbol of a steering wheel, with characters indicating he was a truck-driver.

"What is the price of your chickens?" the truck-driver asked.

"Three *yuan* a *jin*," Zhao-di answered. The price was thirty *fen* more than her mother-in-law had told her to sell them for.

"You must be joking. How can the price be so high?" the driver said. He squatted down, took a hen and began to examine it. He touched the crop to check whether it contained something heavy. Many sellers would fill their birds' crops with grain, sand, or even iron pellets to increase the weight. Then he looked at its

eyes and anus, and felt its claws, to see if it was young and healthy. After he was sure that nothing was wrong with the hen, he put it back in the cage, took out another one and started all over again.

Finally, he began to bargain. "Two and forty. We'll take all."

"Two and ninety-five," said Zhao-di.

"Two and fifty, not a *fen* more. That's today's market price."

"Two and ninety, not a *fen* less."

"All right, all right," the other young man chipped in impatiently. "Weigh them. We'll take them all." As a matter of fact, it was he who had wanted to buy chickens. The driver was only acting as his assistant. The young man wasn't used to bargaining, and Zhao-di's price was cheaper than where he was from. But mainly he was too happy that day to care about a few *yuan*. His wife had just born him a son two days earlier. It was not only a once-in-a-lifetime event for him and his wife, but also a proud moment for their parents, since nowadays a couple was allowed only one child. To reward his wife, the young man, with money given by his parents, made a special request of the driver to give him a lift to buy chickens. After delivery, a new mother needed nourishing food.

"Stupid!" The driver knit his brows and glanced at him, but then he smiled. How could one be stern with a man who was so happy?

"Well," the driver said half-jokingly. "Since your wife has born a son, a few more *yuan* means nothing. Right, you lucky guy?"

Zhao-di borrowed a scale from a woman who sat next to her selling vegetables. She weighed the chickens. Altogether they came to 31 *jin*, four and a half *liang*. The young man paid her 91 *yuan* and 21 *fen*. Then he offered her two *yuan* to buy the bamboo cages, which were probably worth less than one *yuan*. So, Zhao-di had almost ten more *yuan* than she'd expected. She wrapped 90 *yuan* in a handkerchief, and stashed it into the pocket of her blouse. The leftover change was enough for all the things her mother-in-law had ordered.

It took her only fifteen minutes to make all the purchases. It was still early. She didn't want to go home at once, so with the shoulder-pole in her hand and the salt and matches in a bag hung on her shoulder, she wandered about the market. When she passed by a snack bar, Zhao-di realized she was hungry. She stopped and touched the money in her pocket. Yes, she could eat one or two bowls of rice sticks: it would cost 25 *fen* a bowl. She could tell her mother-in-law that she sold the cages for one and-a-half *yuan*. The old woman would not suspect she had spent any money.

At the door of the snack bar, nevertheless, she stopped. It was a luxury for her to buy a snack. And she felt guilty about eating anything without sharing it with her family. She gulped and tried to leave. But the mouthwatering smell of food tempted her, and she peeped into the bar.

The place was full. Many customers were waiting in a long line to get their food. Quite a few people were eating their rice sticks in a standing or squatting position, because all the tables were occupied. On the tables were piles of used bowls. Those who

worked in the bar were too busy to take them away. There was one exception, a clean table covered with about ten bowls of rice sticks, two plates of roast pork, two of sliced liver and tripe, all untouched. At the table, there was only one young man, in brand new clothes with his hair carefully oiled and parted down the middle. Instead of eating, he was waving his hand to drive away the flies that were attacking the food. Bystanders cast knowing glances at him. He blushed right up to his ears.

The scene reminded her of what had happened here seven years ago. That day, she and Chuan-zong were introduced to each other as potential marriage partners. Chuan-zong bought a great deal of food for her and her girlfriends, who also wanted to "have a look at him." When the food was brought to the table, the giggling girls ran away, partly to play a joke on him, partly to show they were shy. Decent girls were supposed to be shy in front of a strange young man. Before the girls were persuaded to go back to the table by his companions, Chuan-zong had to wave away flies from the food for ten minutes. How embarrassed he was. But he didn't get angry at all.

"How different a man can be, before and after the wedding," Zhao-di thought. She sighed and stepped away. "How happy a woman would be if she was courted forever but never got married!"

A married woman could be happy, too. The smiling face of the young man who'd bought her chickens flashed in her mind. His wife should certainly be very happy. Obviously, he had travelled a long way just to buy her some chickens. Comparing

him with her own husband, who often beat her, Zhao-di sighed deeply and her eyes grew moist.

But that young man's wife deserved his affection, because she'd made him a happy father. If Zhao-di herself could bear a son for Chuan-zong, he would certainly be nice to her, too. To be honest, Zhao-di told herself, she couldn't blame Chuan-zong. He was not a bad man. It was all her fault. He was unhappy just because she didn't have a son! Oh, if only she could have a son!

Tears burst from her eyes. She didn't wipe her face; in fact she forgot that others would stare. In a daze, she left the fair and walked straight to the commune hospital. She would beg the doctors to cure her sterility.

The little commune hospital was half a mile from the town. It consisted of four plain one-storey buildings. Behind the hospital flowed a muddy river with steep rocky banks, and on the slopes of the banks grew dense bamboo bushes.

The clinic was closed because it was Sunday. In the emergency room, there was only one doctor on duty, who leaned on the back of her chair, taking a nap.

Zhao-di put one foot in the room and recognized the slumbering doctor as the same one who had once examined her and told her she was sterile. Zhao-di knew this lady doctor had a hot temper. And in her eyes a doctor in a white overcoat—even a doctor in so awkward a posture, with her eyes closed and her mouth open, slobbering—was mysterious and awesome. So she

didn't dare to disturb her. She was sure the doctor would recognize her anyway, and scold her for being a nuisance.

Timidly, Zhao-di walked away. Yet she simply could not bear to leave the hospital entirely, so she wandered around outside the four buildings.

Through a window, Zhao-di saw two newborn babies sleeping in small cots. She stared at them with longing.

If they were hers, Zhao-di thought, her husband would be nice to her, her mother-in-law would stop picking on her, and her neighbours would respect her. When she and her husband grew old, these children would take care of them. After the old couple died, the children would visit their graves and offer sacrifices, so that their spirits would not go hungry.

As if under a spell, Zhao-di put down the shoulder-pole and stole into the ward. With a thin trembling hand, she touched an infant's face with great care, as though it were the most delicate treasure in the world. The baby was fast asleep. Its skin was pink, its face wrinkled. Its thin nostrils, which were almost translucent, quivered when it snored slightly.

Zhao-di held up the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. She kissed it tenderly on the forehead. She wanted to put the baby back into the crib, but she could not. She looked around. There was no one in sight. Holding the baby close to her chest, she tiptoed out of the ward and disappeared into the bamboo bush behind the hospital.

Zhao-di hid herself behind a rock in the bushes. Her eyes were glued to the sleeping infant. How adorable it was! Now it was

hers! Was it a boy or a girl? Zhao-di gently unwrapped the swaddling clothes. It was a boy! His little penis was hard because he was about to urinate.

The baby woke. He cried and peed on Zhao-di's clothes. She patted his bottom and hummed to him. But he cried even louder. Zhao-di panicked. Clumsily, she exposed her underdeveloped breasts, and pushed a nipple into the baby's mouth. He stopped crying and began to suck. A shock of joy flew into her body. She was feeding a baby. She was a mother. She had a son now.

But a few seconds later the baby turned his head away from her and began to scream. The scream pulled Zhao-di back to reality. What should she do with this baby? She couldn't bring him home. If she did, her husband would beat her, the neighbours would laugh at her, and the police would throw her into jail. She broke into a cold sweat. Trembling, she wrapped up the baby, put him down on the ground, and walked away.

She only walked a few steps before the baby's shrieks drew her back. She picked him up, flicked off a couple of ants that were crawling on his body, and wiped the tears running down to his ears with her sleeve. Patting him, Zhao-di murmured, "Don't cry, don't cry..." as she herself began to sob.

With tears on her cheeks and the baby in her arms, Zhao-di walked up the slope. She wanted to carry him back to the hospital.

Stepping out of the bushes, Zhao-di heard a tumult coming from the direction of the hospital. They must be looking for the baby! The bamboo creaked near her in the north wind. She turned and dashed into the brush. The bamboo branches tore her

clothes and scraped her face, but she felt nothing. In her distraction she had slipped, and was sliding down the slope. Her pants and her legs were cut by bamboo roots, yet she continued to clutch the baby to her breast. Standing up, Zhao-di covered the crying baby's face with her hand and looked around. She saw a rock crevice, and wedged herself into it at once.

The bamboo kept creaking, as if someone were approaching. The baby was crying hoarsely. Zhao-di's hand pressed tighter and tighter against the infant. After a while, the baby quieted down.

Her heart pounded against her chest. Her mouth was dry and bitter, her forehead covered with sweat. Holding her breath, she listened anxiously. Time slowed down; her mind grew numb.

Hours seemed to pass, but no one came to search the bushes. Zhao-di took her hand from the baby's mouth and crawled from the crevice. She looked and found the baby's face was white. He was not breathing.

She shook him wildly.

"He is dead!" Zhao-di groaned.

The bamboo, creaking in the wind, seemed to groan as well.

Zhao-di stood woodenly, the lifeless baby in her arms. Her dress was ragged. Her hair was tangled with dry leaves. There were scratches on her arms, legs, and her pale tear-stained face. With blank fixed eyes, she stared down at the muddy red river.

Through the bamboo foliage, the sunlight formed bright spots, dancing on the damp ground, and brightening the baby's tear-stained face. To clean it, Zhao-di took from her pocket the handkerchief, in which she had wrapped her money. Instead of

unwrapping it, however, she stuffed the handkerchief, together with the money, into the baby's swaddling clothes. Then the woman stroked the little face, humming and murmuring. The sound was now a lullaby, then a lament, and finally a faint whimper, lost on the evening breezes.

The Actress

"Chi Li killed himself!"

The news was spreading across the Cultural Compound, which housed several provincial theatre troupes. Chi's broken body had just been found on the pavement outside the five-story building where he had been confined.

Everyone was shocked, even though, within the compound, as many as four persons had recently committed suicide. It simply didn't seem possible for the strong-willed young playwright to have taken his own life. He had, of course, been criticized and detained because of his works. But who, among all the writers in this country, hadn't been criticized? And detention was routine treatment for most men of letters during the Cultural Revolution. The young man's political life was surely far from over, because the authorities hadn't labelled him a counter-revolutionary. Up to his death, none of his politically-incorrect words and deeds had seemed to be fatally wrong. And what's more, he had always been so sanguine. His favourite expression had been "Everything will turn out alright." During a struggle session just two days earlier, to refute a critic's accusation that he was an anti-communist, Chi Li had declared, "Call me whatever you like. But everything will turn out alright. I'm still a Party member, and the Party will eventually be assured of my loyalty and will clear my name."

How could such a man have committed one of the most wicked crimes of opposition to the Party--suicide? The question was on everyone's mind, but none dared to voice it.

The moment the news reached the rehearsal hall a few hundred meters from the incident, all activity there stopped. People's eyes turned to Chi Li's wife, Fu Meng-lan, who, up until now, had been rehearsing the role of Sister Ah Qing. Sister Ah Qing was the heroine in one of ten "Revolutionary Standard Operas". For any actress, it was a tremendous honour to play this part.

Falling back a step, Fu Meng-lan braced herself against the wall. Her face paled, her nose and facial muscles twitched violently and her eyes filled with tears. But scarcely a minute had passed before she again stood erect; the tears froze in her eyes and her face stiffened. She remained motionless for two minutes; the entire rehearsal hall was still. She made for the exit. At first she faltered, but her steps grew steadier; all eyes followed her as if she were under a spotlight. After she stepped out of the hall, instead of turning right to see her husband's corpse, she went left and entered the troupe office. About an hour later, she emerged with a *dazibao*, on which the black ink was still wet. She pasted it onto a wall. It began with a "Supreme Instruction", a quotation from Mao, as all *dazibao* must, and her declaration followed.

Dazibao

December 13, 1968

SUPREME INSTRUCTION

All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese writer, Szuma Chien, said, "Though death befalls all men alike, it may be heavier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather." To die for the people is heavier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather.

Reactionary Element Chi Li committed suicide to escape punishment. He was guilty of the most heinous crimes. His death is lighter than a feather.

I solemnly declare that I have severed my marriage ties to Chi Li. Moreover, I will make a clean break from his poisonous influence.

I pledge to study Chairman Mao's works devotedly. I will strive to remold my ideology, and I will strive to perfect the role in the magnificent Revolutionary Standard Opera which the Party has entrusted to me.

Fu Meng-lan

She sat in her dormitory, as if lifeless. She was alone: in order to throw all her energy into the rehearsals, she had sent her three-year-old daughter to stay with the child's grandparents.

Old Ma, head of the military control team stationed with the acting troupe, came to see her. He was accompanied by the director, Old Feng, who had been Chi Li's friend. Feng was speechless and wooden-faced. Old Ma praised Fu Meng-lan for taking a firm class stand, for placing righteousness above family loyalty. Then, stretching out his hand, Old Ma bid her goodnight. As he touched Fu's hand, he cringed and pulled his own away. He had always adored Fu's hands: they were beautiful, soft and

smooth; full of expression. But now they were ice-cold and clammy; he would rather have touched a snake.

After Old Ma and Old Feng were gone, Hai Ying, Fu's best friend, arrived. Hai glanced around cautiously, then she stopped at Fu's door and raised her hand. She faltered; she hadn't the nerve to tap on the door. A few seconds later, she sighed inaudibly and went away.

Then came another visitor, Du Hong-bing, who had vied bitterly with Fu for the role of Sister Ah Qing. Du had believed that she was in a favourable position to win the part: her newlywed husband was a regiment commander. Her failure was all the more painful when she learned that Commissar Liu of the provincial military region was Fu's admirer.

Du had no sooner entered the room than she began to speak, "Meng-lan, you do very well in studying Chairman Mao's works. That's why you can take such a firm revolutionary stand! We all can learn a lesson from you ... you, who are so merciless with the enemy ... even when the enemy is your husband!"

Without a word, Fu waved her hand to invite the other woman to sit down. She reached for a thermos to offer Du a drink of water.

"No, no, thank you." Du Hong-bing was still standing. "I have to leave at once. My husband has a cold ... I have to go home and look after him. Do take care of yourself. Goodbye."

At the door, Du turned to face the widow and smiled. "I've heard that Commissar Liu is expecting a new posting. Don't be too upset if he doesn't ask you to his place to play ping-pong

anymore." And after a pause, Du Hong-bing added, "They have just asked me to play Sister Ah Qing."

Night fell. Fu's next-door neighbours were unusually silent. After the curtains were drawn in the onlooking windows, Fu Meng-lan drew her own. She locked the door and turned out the light, then sat on the edge of the bed. She began to sob. To suppress the sound, the woman buried her face in a pillow and clenched the cloth with her teeth. Her hands touched the other pillow, which had been her husband's. Slowly she stroked it, then held it tightly to her bosom.

For many hours she stared into the darkness, leaning against the head of her bed. Now and then, happy moments from the past flashed back through her mind. Her wedding, her debut on stage, the ovations of the audience, high-ranking officials' congratulations...all came and went like a whirlwind.

A rooster crowed in the neighborhood, the others joined him. The morning came and Fu Meng-lan got up. She washed her face carefully, then looked into a mirror, and began to practice her facial expressions.

A bell in a nearby office building rang as office hours began. As if hearing an order from a director, Fu Meng-lan jumped into action. To see her face as she emerged from her room, one would hardly believe that her husband had just met a tragic death. The actress knew that her acting career might be finished along with her husband's life, yet the acting in real life had to go on.

Treasure Hunters

Wild Cat was back! Immediately the news spread among the young men of Li Village, who were working in the fields. Again and again they looked at the sun in the sky, wishing they could pull it down so that they could go home and listen to Wild Cat's stories.

"Wild Cat" was the nickname of a young man from this tiny mountain village in southern China. Though he was supposed to be a peasant like every other adult living in the village, Wild Cat had hardly done any farm work in his entire life. Like a wild cat he roamed about the country, earning his living in who knew what ways. Two or three times a year, he would come back to the village, sometimes in new clothes or even with a watch on his wrist; sometimes in rags, returning from a jail for vagabonds. One was forbidden to be a vagabond by the government, but nothing could keep Wild Cat in the village for longer than a week. His widowed mother had wept, scolded and begged her only child, but she could not change his mind. Finally she gave up. The village cadres had also exhorted Wild Cat countless times. But no matter what they said or what he promised, Wild Cat always left again. Had it happened in another village, Wild Cat would very likely have gotten into big trouble. Fortunately, in this particular village all the people belonged to the same clan--Li. The cadres were Wild Cat's relatives, so they did not use force to prevent him from leaving.

The young men in the village, who were not very educated and had never travelled beyond the county limits, were fascinated by Wild Cat. He had so many adventures to tell, and he could tell them so well. From his mouth, a common event like peeing could sound more bizarre than the stories of *The Arabian Nights*. .

"Snow, snow, nothing but snow," he once told these young men, who had never seen a snowflake. "I walked alone on the prairie of Inner Mongolia. It was up to my knees and it was cold! I peed. Good Heavens! A yellow ice stick appeared, connecting the snow and my penis, which was stiff with cold!"

The sun set at last. The time came to pack up. Presently the young men began to gather under a huge banyan tree at the edge of the village. This was the meeting place whenever Wild Cat returned to the village. For fear of being late, some of them hadn't taken time to bathe—you could smell it. Some brought their still-steaming suppers with them, carrying a pair of chopsticks and an enormous bowl filled with rice gruel, corn or pumpkin porridge.

Usually Wild Cat would not appear until his entire audience was waiting and somebody had been sent to get him. But that evening he was early and had arrived ahead of some of his listeners. He was twenty-six, tall and well-built, with eyes constantly in motion as if searching for something. His skin was fairer, his hair longer than the other young men. He was wearing a brand new Dacron shirt and pale grey pants with cuffs four inches narrower than the others'. On his feet were nylon socks

and black plastic sandals; on his wrist, a shining watch. He looked like a city slicker. Contrasted with his suntanned audience in black or blue pants and dark coloured vests, he was like a peacock among chickens.

As soon as he arrived, Wild Cat took out a pack of cigarettes and distributed them to the other men, exchanging greetings with each. Then, with a new metal lighter, he lit one for himself, and sat down on a bamboo chair which had been set up specially for him.

Before he had finished his cigarette everyone had arrived. There were fifteen young men. They gathered around him, standing, squatting or sitting.

Wild Cat extinguished the cigarette butt with his foot and coughed slightly to clear his throat. There was a sudden silence as he began to talk. Instead of speaking of his adventures, Wild Cat talked about President Nixon's visit to China in 1972. This event had taken place several years earlier, but Wild Cat's account was new to his audience. There was something in it that could not be read in any newspaper in the world.

"The chief of the Paper Tigers came to our China," Wild Cat said. "What are Paper Tigers? I guess you know. Paper Tiger is the name Chairman Mao gave the American devils. The chief, or President, as they called him, was a man named Nixon. He visited China with two of his most talented lackeys. One was the well-known Kissinger, the other was called Haig. By the way, have any of you even seen an American devil? No? Of course not! American devils have pale skin covered with thick brown hair.

The hair on their heads is many different colours--yellow, brown, mousy, even red. Their eyes are also different colours: blue, green, grey. And some Americans have eyes that change colours from green to blue to grey. Eyes like this have special functions. They can see in the dark like a cat's, and they can even see treasures buried deeply in the earth or hidden in safes. They are more powerful than x- rays. That's why so many Chinese treasures were stolen before the Liberation. You've all read stories of how the American devils uncovered our national treasures and stole them, haven't you?

"Now, let's return to our subject. Nixon asked to come to China to meet Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou En-lai. Chairman Mao said, "All right. You are welcome." So Nixon and his lackeys came. The first day, Premier Zhou gave them a grand banquet. The food was so good that Nixon ate until he could hardly stand. With his thumb raised, he praised the meal, 'Okay, very good. Chinese food number one!'

"Of course the Chinese food Nixon ate was totally different from what you eat. What do you have for supper, brother?" Wild Cat turned to a thin boy with a bowl in his hand. "Corn porridge. Doesn't taste very good, does it? Well, while you may never have a chance to taste Chinese food in a banquet, you have seen it with your own eyes. But only in documentary films about the state banquets given by our leaders. To entertain a person at these banquets, I guess it may take as much money as a peasant earns from several months of work. So some people think that those big shots at the banquets are consuming the people's toil and sweat.

But this opinion is absolutely wrong, because only in the Old Society did the politicians devour the people's sweat and blood. In our new society, it's absolutely reasonable to hold huge banquets for foreign guests. It's above criticism. Why? When you have a guest at your table, what should you do? You should give him the best food you can get. Moreover our state leaders are the wisest people in the world. They have another very profound reason for giving these banquets. They want to conquer the foreign guests with Chinese food. It's just patriotism, see. We have to be patriotic!

"Now let's see what Nixon did on the second day. Besides negotiating, he and his party visited the Palace Museum in Peking.

"I guess none of you have ever been in this museum. What a pity! I myself have visited it twice. Most of the state treasures are kept there. One of these is a golden bowl. This bowl is incredibly valuable, not only because it's made of gold, but also because it has magic power. Unbelievable power. It turns any country which possesses it into a treasure bowl as well. For example, most of the oil under the earth will suddenly flow to that country. I can show you evidence. You all learned in school that after we Chinese began to exploit the Daqing Oil Field, many wells in the Soviet Union had to close down because the oil had flowed into China."

Most of the young men nodded their heads. One of them tried to add more details, but the others told him to shut up so that Wild Cat could go on.

"Well, that day all the treasures in the museum were taken out of their safes so that Nixon and his party could view them closely.

Nixon, Kissinger and Haig spent a long time examining the golden bowl. Nixon even picked it up and passed it to the others, which was completely against the rules, but since they were state guests the guards did not stop them. When Haig had finished examining the bowl, he put it back in its place. They spent about two hours viewing the other treasures, and then they left.

"Minutes later the telephone rang in the museum director's office. It was the Premier's office calling. 'Are any treasures missing?'

'No, everything is in its usual place.'

'Check again! Especially the golden bowl.'

"The museum treasures were examined. Alas, they found that the golden bowl had been replaced by a fake! I'll tell you the truth. Those American devils were thieves. Before they came to China, they cleverly made a substitute.

"You may ask, 'How could they make a bowl that was exactly like the real one?' Some experts say that Kissinger could see the treasure bowl clearly from ten thousand miles with his powerful blue/grey eyes. Others say the American devils bought information about the golden bowl from a certain traitor who was one of our country's top-ranking diplomats.

"Anyway, somehow the American devils constructed a fake and brought it to China, hidden in Haig's briefcase. When Kissinger passed him the bowl, Haig stealthily took out the fake and switched them, right under the eyes of the guards who were watching like hawks. But Haig was one of the world's greatest thieves, which was why Nixon had chosen him to be his assistant.

"By the way, as a thief, Nixon himself was less skillful than Haig. Two years later, Nixon was caught committing a sort of burglary. He not only lost face, he lost his presidency as well.

"But let's return to the golden bowl in Haig's briefcase. According to international law, police are not permitted to search the bags of state guests. Haig could easily carry the stolen bowl back to the United States, and if this happened, we Chinese would lose our oil, which is the life-blood of the industries. Haig was cunning. He would carry the treasure with him at all times, letting nothing distract him from it for a thousandth of a second.

"The Chinese police had a terrible headache. But at least they still had heads to ache, which might not be the case if they failed to retrieve the stolen treasure.

"They were forced to report to Premier Zhou that they had no idea what to do. The Premier smiled and said kindly, 'Take it easy, comrades. You don't have to do a thing. Leave these Americans to me.'

"That evening there was a gala for the guests. Needless to say, they all attended and Haig carried the treasure with him. He sat on a chair surrounded by Americans with the briefcase on his knees, gripping it with both hands.

"The gala was nothing special. Groups of dancers and singers danced and sang. It was the kind of thing you can see anytime in the movies. And as usual, there was a Chinese magic show.

"The magician invited an American to be his volunteer assistant. He produced a white dove, showed it to the audience, then locked it in an empty box, giving the key to the volunteer.

Then he waved his magic wand, fired a toy pistol, and asked the assistant to open the box. The dove had disappeared.

"They locked the box and repeated the procedure. When it was reopened, the dove was there once again, cooing.

"After this the magician took out a golden bowl. He locked it in the box. The first time they opened the box, as everyone expected, the bowl was gone. The second time they opened the box, still no bowl. The audience murmured. The magician looked very embarrassed.

"Suddenly the spotlight fell on Haig. All eyes were turned on him. Haig was stunned.

"The magician smiled. 'Sorry!' he said. 'The naughty bowl has escaped and is hiding somewhere. Let's find it.'

"He stepped from the stage and approached Haig slowly. He bowed gracefully. 'Sir, I'm very sorry, but the bowl has hidden itself in your briefcase without asking your permission. Would you mind opening it up?'

"Haig could do nothing but open the briefcase and hand the bowl to the magician. The audience burst into thunderous applause for the magician's exceptional performance. Nixon, Kissinger and Haig had to smile and clap their hands like everyone else.

"So we Chinese got the bowl back, while saving Nixon's face. Only our wise leaders could ever have devised such a stratagem.

"The Paper Tigers learned that the Chinese were much smarter than they were. From then on they dared not try any dirty tricks!"

The young men could not help laughing and applauding. They were very happy that their national pride had been satisfied. They were proud to be ruled by such wise leaders. Wild Cat smiled, allowing time for the happiness and pride to overflow from the young men's chests.

"Later," he added, "when he exchanged gifts with Nixon, Premier Zhou gave him a duplicate of the treasure bowl. It was none other than the very fake that Haig had left in the museum. With this gesture, our Premier was saying that this fake was not worthy to remain in China, but also that we Chinese were merciful. We couldn't bear to see them lose both their labour and their gold."

Once again, the audience burst into proud laughter.

"Quiet please," said Wild Cat. "I have something more exciting to tell you. But--oh, good heavens!" He looked at his luminous watch. "There's no time left. Tomorrow you all have to wake up before sunrise and go to the fields. We'd better just go home."

And no matter how the young men implored him to stay, Wild Cat would not listen. He left them with the promise that he would continue the story as soon as possible.

The next evening the young men gathered at the same spot. Among them there was a newcomer, Old Ninth.

In this village, people were usually called not by their formal names, but by numbers allotted according to their seniority in the clan. "Old Ninth" meant that among the men of the same generation, he was the ninth eldest.

Old Ninth, at twenty-five, was an important person to the villagers. He worked in a neighbouring commune as the administration clerk and secretary of the Youth League. Although his rank was only 25th—the second lowest among state cadres—his status was still higher than all the other people in Li Village, who had no rank at all. As a matter of fact, in many ways, he was more clever and knowledgeable than they. Unlike many cadres who kept themselves aloof, Old Ninth was amiable to his clansmen. Many people in the village, especially the young, turned to him for advice when they had problems.

As soon as Wild Cat arrived, the young men urged him to tell them more about Nixon's visit to China.

"All right, all right," Wild Cat said. "I'll tell you more. Besides the golden bowl, Nixon was greedy for another kind of treasure. American stock certificates.

"What are American stock certificates? And why did an American president come to China to find them? To answer these questions, we have to look back to a time before the Liberation of 1949. At that time, the Kuomintang knew they were about to be defeated by the Communists. So they sold as many Chinese national treasures as they could to the American imperialists. In return, the American devils paid them with something called shares in the Bank of America. Owning shares in a bank is like owning part of the bank. The more shares you have, the more profits you can make.

"However, many of these Kuomintang people didn't make a single penny from their shares, because the mainland was

liberated before they could escape. So they had to burn or hide their stock certificates.

"Thirty years passed. The stocks became more and more valuable in America. Those stock certificates which were hidden by the Kuomintang became very precious. Some were worth millions. Now you know why Nixon was so interested in those missing stock certificates.

"At first, he and his lackeys thought it would be easy to get those certificates on the sly. But after their plot to steal the treasure bowl failed, they realized their mistake. So they talked to our Chinese leaders.

"Our leaders said, 'We will get you these stock certificates, but you must give us things we need—medicines, computers, missiles.' So an agreement was struck.

"Some of you may have read in *The People's Daily* about an old man named Zhu, who lived in Tianjin City, who got 380,000 *yuan* for his shares..."

"He's right," Old Ninth broke in with an authoritative tone. "I've kept a copy of the news report."

"Three hundred and eighty thousand *yuan* . That's a lot of money," continued Wild Cat. "You may find it unbelievable. But compared to what many others have, that man's shares were almost nothing.

"You may ask, 'Why didn't the others sell their stock to the government, too?' The answer is simple. Before the liberation, what kind of person would own stock certificates? Poor workers and peasants? Of course not. Only high-ranking officers or

officials, big capitalists or big landlords. In other words, our class enemies. Would the Communist Party be prepared to make them millionaires again? Even you aren't so naive as to believe that! Imagine what would happen to them if they handed in their certificates. Maybe at first, the government would reward them with money and fame. But later, they would have to give away the money in one way or another. They might be thrown into jail for not having handed them in sooner."

The audience burst into approving laughter.

"But," said Wild Cat, "since the certificates are so valuable, it makes sense for the owners to try to turn them into money, even if the money is much less than the real value of their stock. After thirty years under the proletarian dictatorship, the class enemies are now very poor. They need money badly. So some shareholders sell their certificates to smugglers. And the smugglers make big money smuggling them to Hong Kong.

"Some stockholders, those with patriotic feelings or chicken hearts, sell them bit by bit to reliable persons with good political backgrounds. These reliable persons give the certificates to the government. They make up some story, for example that they found the certificates stashed in a steel box when they were digging a foundation for a new house. The government rewards them with money and honors. Everyone benefits: the government, the donors, and the original owners. In fact, I personally know a few people who are in this business. I myself —" He stopped abruptly, then glanced at his watch and exclaimed. "Ah! Ten

o'clock already. I guess we'll have to quit. Tomorrow morning I'll be leaving at six."

The young men crowded around him, begging him to stay. Some asked if his brand new watch had anything to do with the stock business. The watch was an Omega, worth nearly four hundred *yuan*!!

But Wild Cat only insisted he had to leave.

"Listen, Wild Cat," said Old Ninth, who had been silent. "Sit down. There is something I want to ask you. Are you really in the stock business? Have you really made any money?"

"Maybe," said Wild Cat.

"Are you planning to buy some certificates yourself?"

"Maybe."

"How will you raise the money?"

"I'm going to borrow it."

"Who from?"

"From some friends. I'm going to see them tomorrow. That's why I have to leave early."

"Damn you, Wild Cat," Old Ninth exploded. "You forget that all of us share the same family name. Why haven't you turned to us for help? Or don't you want us to share any of your good luck?"

"Don't talk like that, Brother Ninth. You are my clansmen and I don't want to involve you in any risks."

"So it's all right for you but not for us?"

"No, I don't mean that. Please don't push me to the wall. What are you asking, Brother Ninth?"

"I want to know all about the business. Let's see if it's worth investing in."

"There are too many people here."

"Come on, Wild Cat, don't you trust us?" said Old Seventh. "We won't give away your secrets."

"Of course not!" said several others.

"It's not that I don't trust you," said Wild Cat. "But as the saying goes, 'You can see a man's face but not his heart'. I have to be careful."

But the young men pleaded, as if ready to cut open their chests to let Wild Cat examine their hearts. But no matter what they said, Wild Cat could not be brought round.

Finally Old Ninth broke the deadlock. "Listen all of you," he shouted. "We can't say Wild Cat is unreasonable. Tomorrow evening, at eight-thirty, all of you who are over twenty can come to my parents' house. We'll all swear to secrecy, and then Wild Cat will tell us the truth. Do you agree, Wild Cat?"

With a sigh, Wild Cat agreed. "Now all of you," said Old Ninth, "go home and keep your mouths shut."

Old Ninth's parents' house was a single-story building with tile roof and walls of rammed earth. It was separated from the other houses in the village by tall, dense bamboos. It happened that evening that two films were being shown in the village. Everyone in the family except Old Ninth had gone to the movies.

The young men over twenty gathered in the hall of the house. There were thirteen in all. When the last man had arrived, the door was shut.

In the hall against the wall was a long table. On it were two burning candles, two stacks of bowls, a pot of wine and a kitchen knife. Under the table was a red rooster, lying with its wings and feet tied.

All the young men stood erect, facing the table. Old Ninth stepped forward and arranged the bowls into rows on the table. He took up the pot and poured some rice spirits into each bowl. Then, holding the knife in his right hand, he picked up the rooster. Slowly he turned to face the other young men.

Old Ninth had a square face with heavy eyebrows, and a strong jaw. With the knife in his hand and a strange light flashing in his eyes, he looked awesome.

"Kneel, all of you!"

The other men went down on their knees at once, in complete silence. Not even the rooster made a noise.

"We are all of the Li Clan," Old Ninth's solemn voice intoned in the still night. "We swear to share our fortunes, good or bad. We swear ourselves to secrecy. Whoever violates this pledge will be treated like this rooster!"

With a single stroke he chopped the bird's head off. Then he dripped a little blood into each of the bowls.

Old Ninth told the men to stand. One by one, he handed them their bowls. They held them in both hands. Old Ninth took the last bowl for himself.

All of them repeated after Old Ninth, "I swear!"

Then, with heads held high, they poured the mixture down their throats. Their hearts beat faster. They felt bound together by a mysterious tie; from then on they would all be watched by invisible eyes.

Wild Cat took out an envelope, and drew a sheet of paper from the envelope. On the paper, in handsome characters, was the following:

Information Concerning Stock Certificates of the Bank of America

The stock certificates are hidden in a silver box that has been sealed with two pieces of gold foil. Each piece of gold foil bears the embossed stamp of the President of the United States. On the lid of the box are relief carvings of two dragons. In the mouth of each dragon is a special pearl which radiates light from midnight to three a.m. each day. On the box are forty-nine gems of different colours, which also function as pushbuttons. When all forty-nine buttons are pressed one by one in a certain sequence, the box opens automatically. In the box are thirty-six stock certificates with face values ranging from \$30,000 to \$408,632,000.

"What is this?" said Little Fifteenth, a short man with a shaven head, pointing to the "\$".

"This is the symbol for an American dollar," Wild Cat explained. "An American dollar is worth two *yuan* and fifty *feng*. Nowadays the certificates are worth more than ten times their face value. So if you have one for \$30,000, you can sell it for \$300,000 in the United States. Understand?"

"I wish I could have one," said Little Fifteenth. "Then I wouldn't have to work in the fields any more."

"Not just you, but your family, even your future children and their children, would be able to live in luxury without working," said another man. All the young men began chattering among themselves.

"Shut up, all of you," said Old Ninth. "Tell us, Wild Cat - are you sure you have somebody who will sell you the certificates?"

"Sure. All that's needed is the money."

"How much do you need? And how many can you buy?"

"The owner's son is a very good friend of mine. I once saved his life when he was drowning--did I ever tell you about this? Sure, I must have.

"Anyway, the father is very grateful to me. He has promised to sell me two or three certificates at a third of the regular price. So I plan to get the least valuable certificate first. Then after I sell it, I'll buy more."

"Answer my question," said Ninth. "How much will you pay? And how much will the government give you for it?"

"Why do you need to know? I can't even be sure I'll succeed."

"Just tell me." Old Ninth seemed impatient. "Tell us definitely, do you want us to be your partners or not?"

"I don't mind, since we are all of the same clan. But there's one thing I must point out. I'm not asking you to do this. Don't blame me if something goes wrong!"

Old Ninth turned to the other eleven young men. "Did you hear what he just said? Those who have no intention of getting involved, please leave!"

No one moved. "See," said Old Ninth. "We all want to support you. So tell us the details."

Wild Cat began to explain. It would cost 3,000 *yuan* to buy a \$30,000 certificate. And according to usual practice, the government would pay 100,000 *yuan*, knowing it could get \$300,000 from the Americans.

One hundred thousand *yuan* for only 3,000! What a deal! In no time the young men had reached agreement. They would pool 3,000 *yuan*, plus another 300 for miscellaneous expenses. Once they had their reward, twenty percent would go to Wild Cat for his special services; the rest to be shared among all the investors based on how much each had invested. After that they would decide on their next purchase.

Wild Cat promised to invest 300 *yuan*, as did Old Ninth. The others also named their figures, ranging from 80 to 350 *yuan*.

None of them was rich enough to raise the money easily. But each would find a way. Two men said they would withdraw the money from their savings, set aside for future weddings. Four would sell their hogs, even though a few of these were too young to fetch a good market price. Three said they would sell their bicycles or watches. And those who had neither savings nor valuables promised to borrow money from relatives and friends.

Old Ninth said they needed a treasurer, but he and Wild Cat both refused the position. The young men elected Old Seventh, the oldest among them.

Once these details were settled, the talk became general. Old Tenth mentioned his concern: one could be sentenced to death for only 10,000 *yuan*.. How could the government give them 100,000? Probably the government would squeeze the money out of them later. Everyone knew that profiteers were always punished severely.

Old Ninth said they could avoid trouble by donating some of the money to public welfare. The other men agreed. They would build a new primary school for the village, since the old one was about to collapse. Only a few months earlier, a tragedy had occurred in a neighbouring village, when an old schoolhouse had collapsed during a storm. Nearly thirty children had been injured or killed.

What's more, if they were successful a second time, they would build a stone bridge over the brook at the edge of the village. Others suggested a cultural center with television sets and other recreational facilities in it, so that villagers would have a place to go in the evening besides their beds.

But during this talk about public welfare, private schemes were also forming in these men's hearts. New houses, famous-brand bicycles, watches and television sets were emerging. Good-looking girls were smiling in their imagination.

Old Seventh made up his mind to divorce his wife, who had just left him. With enough money, he would have no difficulty finding a new wife, a good wife.

A bright future beckoned to Old Ninth as well. He would become the hero who unearthed a bonanza for the government. That meant he would easily attain higher and higher positions. Someday he might become Party Secretary for the county, or even the prefecture. He smiled, exchanging a glance with Wild Cat who was scanning the scene with constantly-moving eyes.

The money was collected in only a week. Wild Cat said he should make sure that every detail was secure before they transported any money to buy the certificates. Three days later, he came back with a detailed plan all worked out. Thirteen of them would go all together to the provincial capital; the certificate-holder's son would be there with the certificates to meet them. In the capital they would see the provincial director of the Chinese People's Bank, the only man in the province who could authenticate the certificates.

They would meet the owner's son in a hotel. They would give him the 3,000; he would give them the certificates. Then Wild Cat and two others would stay in the hotel with the owner's son, while Old Ninth and the others would go to the bank with the certificate. If it was a fake, they would get back their 3,000 *yuan.*, and the seller would pay their travelling expenses. Even at worst, they would still have a free trip.

It all sounded perfect. They had nothing to lose and everything to gain. The young men could only admire Wild Cat's cleverness. Old Ninth especially appreciated the plan, because in the eyes of the government, he and not Wild Cat would be the hero.

All thirteen men set off for the provincial capital the next day. To get there, they had to walk five miles, then take a bus and a train. That same night they arrived in the city.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, Wild Cat, Old Ninth and the other three partners met the seller in his room in a small hotel named High Peak, while the eight other men waited outside. The seller was a short man in his late twenties or early thirties, whom Wild Cat introduced as Old Wang. They handed Wang three thousand *yuan*; he gave them the stock certificate. It looked like a money order, with some English words and the number \$30,000 printed on it. Old Ninth was surprised at the plainness of the certificate. How could something so valuable look like this? Never mind, he comforted himself, a treasure might look like a piece of junk, just as a state leader might be short and ugly. Moreover, in only a couple of hours, their expert would authenticate it.

Old Ninth put the certificate carefully into an envelope, then put the envelope into a plastic bag. Without further delay he departed with a clansman, leaving Wild Cat, Old Seventh and the other man to watch Wang. As soon as Old Ninth stepped out of the hotel, the men who were waiting outside came running.

Without giving any explanations, Old Ninth told them, "Follow me!"

At a quarter to twelve, the ten men arrived at the Provincial Bank headquarters. It consisted of a few buildings enclosed by high walls. They were stopped at the gate by a grey-haired gatekeeper with glasses.

"Who are you and what do you want here?" said the gatekeeper impolitely, observing them over the top of his glasses. "Have you letters of introduction?"

The other men shrank but not Old Ninth. He approached the gatekeeper. "Here's my I.D. card," he said with an amiable smile. "We should like to see the President. We have some very important information for him."

"You want to see the President?" the gatekeeper sneered, handing Old Ninth back his I.D. card. "To see the President you must show me a letter of introduction issued by a unit not lower than county level."

"Please help us, Old Comrade," Old Ninth pleaded, offering the man a cigarette and then lighting it for him. "We have very important information for the President. If you arrange the meeting for us, Old Comrade, we will certainly reward you. By the way, judging by your accent, you must be from the same county as we are. Are you from Dragon Mountain? What a coincidence! As the saying goes, 'All the people from your birthplace are as dear as your relatives!' Of course you'll help us, right, Old Uncle?" Old Ninth switched the form of address to an

intimate one. "We are very lucky to meet a kindhearted man like you."

"It's lunch break now, young man. Don't you know?" the gatekeeper said. His voice had become slightly less harsh. "The President will not come back before two-thirty, and I have no idea if he will want to receive you. What on earth is this information you want to report to him?"

"May I explain this to you later, Uncle? For this moment I can only tell you that if you arrange this meeting for us, you'll not only be doing us a favour, you'll be doing a good deed for your country. Are you free this evening? After we meet the President, we will have a few drinks with you, since you are so kind, and we are all from the same county."

"Who wants your drinks?" grunted the old man, with a trace of a smile. "Come back at three and try your luck."

"Thank you, thank you so much," said Old Ninth, giving another cigarette to the gatekeeper, though the first one wasn't yet finished. "See you later, Uncle!"

"Hold on, wait a minute," the old man called after them. "You're not coming here to join a gang fight. Don't bring so many people next time. Come by yourself."

As there were still two and a half hours to wait, the ten men lunched in a small restaurant. None but Old Ninth had ever been in the city, and they wanted him to show them around. But Old Ninth told them to wait till the business was over with. He took them to a tiny park, two blocks from the bank.

"Find yourselves benches and sit down," said Old Ninth. "Please don't bother me with any nonsense. I have to prepare for the meeting with the President."

Then he walked away and sat down on the lawn under a willow.

It was sunny that day, and hot. The nine men sat on benches in the shade, watching the passersby. Unlike country women who were always in dark long-sleeved tops and pants, many young women here wore skirts and short-sleeved blouses of light colours and sheer material. The young men muttered that they were indecent, keeping their eyes glued to them all the while.

Along came a plump woman of about 20, in a miniskirt, T-shirt, and high-heeled shoes. Even in this city, her costume was extremely unorthodox. By official standards, this was a sign of spiritual pollution from the West. As she passed the young men, a mixture of perfume and body odor wafted from her. Her bare legs and the curves of her breasts spurred their imaginations. Their hearts pounded as if resonating to the sound of her high-heeled shoes.

When the girl was out of sight, the country boys began to chatter. How could she keep her balance in such shoes? Did she wear underwear under her skirt? Where did she get those fabulous tits? No decent girl would bear her legs like that in public—she must be a prostitute. What a pity Wild Cat was not with them. Otherwise he could have answered their questions, giving all sorts of interesting details.

Wild Cat had told them he had slept with quite a few of these city girls, once even in a fancy hotel with spring beds and air-conditioners. In that kind of hotel, even on the hottest days it was so nicely cool that you didn't get sweaty making love. Those city girls, according to Wild Cat, were totally different from the country women who lay in your bed like a log. They played aggressors! "They may look elegant," Wild Cat said, "But you certainly can buy them if you offer enough money."

"When we get our money," Little Fifteenth said, nodding his shaved head, "we should also try... uh... the hotel which is so nicely cool."

They all burst into laughter. A group of passersby, two men and three women, cast disdainful glances at them. Noticing this, the country boys fell silent and abashed.

As soon as the city people were far enough away, however, the nine became insulted and indignant.

"Fuck you, city people," Little Fifteenth cursed. "What do you have to be so proud of? When I get my money, let's see who will look down on who!"

Under his willow tree, Old Ninth sat, paying no attention to them at all. He had too much on his mind. He was rehearsing his meeting with the President. He dreamed of a great success, but he also greatly feared failure. He was in a sweat. Again and again he wiped his forehead, wrung his hands, and glanced at his watch.

Twenty to three! Old Ninth stood up, wiped his face with a handkerchief, combed his hair with his fingers, and straightened

his clothes. Then, after telling the others to wait at that very spot, he marched back to the bank.

"You are not lucky, young man," said the gatekeeper to Old Ninth. "The President is out at a meeting this afternoon. He won't be back till tomorrow morning. What on earth do you have to say to him? Can't you meet with somebody else?"

After a moment's thought, Old Ninth said, "No, thank you, Uncle. I'd rather come back tomorrow. I'll see you first thing in the morning, and when you get off work as well. Goodbye!"

Before he left, Old Ninth gave the man a cigarette and lit it for him.

The ten men hurried back to the High Peak Hotel. While the others waited outside, Old Ninth and Old Tenth went inside. Old Ninth knocked at the door of Wang's room. No one answered. The door was not locked, so they opened it and entered.

Two men were snoring thunderously on the bed. Wild Cat and Wang were gone.

"Wake up!" shouted Old Ninth. "Where are the others? You were supposed to be watching Wang! Where is Wild Cat?"

Neither of them knew where Wang and Wild Cat were. Wang had given them some soda water, they said, and soon they had fallen into a dead sleep.

II

More than two years had now passed since Wild Cat disappeared with their money, but the young men of Li Village still hadn't got over it. To scrape up the money for their train fare home, they had had to sell the wristwatches belonging to Old Ninth and Old Eighth. Up to now, many of them hadn't yet totally recovered from the economic damage, not to mention the fact that they had become the laughingstock at home and all the surrounding villages. Old Ninth felt he had lost so much face that he seldom showed up at the village anymore. And when they had problems, the villagers no longer turned to him for advice. The other young men simply hated to pass by the fateful banyan tree which stood as a silent reminder of Wild Cat, of their anger and shame.

The only thing they had ever heard from Wild Cat was a letter which Old Ninth received two weeks after his disappearance. The letter was mailed from Canton. In it, Wild Cat begged his kinsmen not to avenge themselves upon his mother, and said that he'd "borrowed" the money to buy boat passage to escape to a place "where a man can be free to make money". He pledged to become wealthy and to pay them back someday a hundred times over. Since then, nobody had heard a thing about him. Now, Wild Cat's mother had died for more than a year, so the last solid tie between Wild Cat and the village was severed. Nobody expected that he would come back into their lives again, though they believed that he might be alive and even rich somewhere outside China.

One evening, however, all of Wild Cat's victims, except Old Ninth, did meet under the banyan tree again. What drew them there was an event which had just taken place in neighbouring Huang Village.

Like Li Village, Huang Village had been poor and obscure for hundreds of years. Lately, however, a descendant of a Huang clansman from the village created a sensation throughout China, and the name of the village had become famous in the whole province, if not the whole country.

In 1949, a young Kuomintang soldier from this village had followed his army and escaped to Taiwan. There he had married and raised a son who grew up to be a pilot in the air force. A few months earlier, the son fled Taiwan in his American-made jet fighter. As soon as he touched the ground of the mainland, the Chinese government awarded him a half million *yuan* and made him a national hero.

Now the hero, escorted by a motorcade, had just paid a brief visit to his father's hometown and the kinsfolk whom he'd never met. His homecoming visit excited even the young men of Li Village. They gathered together spontaneously that evening to talk about the event. A few of them said that the pilot had given his kinsmen a lot of money—300 *yuan* for each close relative and 100 *yuan* for each remote one. The village itself had also benefited—for the pilot's visit, the government had paved the bumpy dirt road to the village with asphalt.

"The Voice of Free China said that he escaped because he'd gambled and owed tons of money," Little Fifteenth cut in

abruptly. Realizing what he'd said was tantamount to admitting that he had listened to the enemy's propoganda, he immediately tried to cover his blunder. "Of course, it's nothing but a lie."

"But who knows," said Old Seventh, patting the baby girl in his arms. His wife, who had just officially divorced him and left him with the daughter, was from Huang Village, so he was resentful of anyone related to the village. "One can't deny that it's very possible that he had slept with his commanding officer's wife."

The others showed their approval with silence. Thanks to the Party's education, they didn't expect that anybody from the enemy ranks could do a good deed without an evil motive. Now they were delighted to see that a crook could turn into a hero! Though no one opened his mouth, everyone turned his eyes towards the road leading to the outside world. Under the silver moonlight, the dirt road was veiled by a light mist and seemed much less rough and bumpy. The distant landscape seemed a mysterious dreamland, whence a miraculous motorcade might emerge.

The second night, however, fewer people gathered under the banyan tree. The third evening even fewer. The fourth evening, only Old Seventh, with his baby, and Fifteenth showed up.

The crescent moon hid behind thick clouds. The two men sat on a stone and gazed into the darkness, while Seventh stroked his daughter gently and Fifteenth touched a scar on his forehead, remembering how he'd received it in the first place. After he was cheated out of the 150 *yuan* by Wild Cat, Fifteenth's father

scolded him almost every evening at the dining table. Fed up with this, Fifteenth once blew up and asked the old man to "shut your stinking mouth". A bowl, hurled by the furious patriarch, left a permanent mark on Fifteenth's forehead.

The baby began to cry and Old Seven said it was the time to go home. With a sigh, Fifteenth followed him. After a few steps, Fifteenth turned and stared, as if trying to penetrate the darkness and reach the remote distance.

"Where are you, Wild Cat?" he murmured.

The meeting place was deserted. Only the aged banyan tree, which had already witnessed the vicissitudes of the world for hundreds of years, still waited there patiently and faithfully, with its leaves whispering in the breeze.

The Typewriter

There's nothing eerie-looking about it—a portable Royal, at least forty years old and with two keys, A and E, blurred.

It once belonged to my cousin, Mei-yin. She was a bookkeeper, and had suffered attacks of nerves. Her husband, Old Huang, a factory director, feared that her job was hurting her health, and hastily sought an easier one for her. One of his official friends consented to create a typist's position for her in the Foreign Trade Company of the city, provided that she could type. The workload would be very light, the friend promised, even a novice could finish one day's job in two or three hours. Old Huang bought a typewriter from a secondhand shop in Shanghai so that his wife could learn to type at home.

When my cousin was about to start her new job, the Cultural Revolution broke out. Some revolutionary rebels who were Old Huang's subordinates accused him of taking the capitalist road. As a matter of routine, they searched the couple's residence, and took away the typewriter. Like most people in this remote border province, who certainly had never seen an English typewriter, they might not have been able to tell the difference between it and a radio transmitter, such as one might see in a post office. More likely though, the rebels just needed a pretext to take over Old Huang's position. At any rate, they called it a radio transmitter, and accused my cousin and her husband of being secret agents in the service of American Imperialism. They confiscated the typewriter and locked the couple up in a "cowshed"—a kind of

makeshift prison. My cousin was tortured to the point of insanity. As a reactionary, she was rejected by all insane asylums, which claimed they only served revolutionaries. Therefore she had to be cared for at home by her elderly mother. Meanwhile her husband remained in the cowshed.

One night, while her mother was sleeping, my cousin jumped from their fourth story window and smashed her skull on the pavement below.

Some months later, as it happened, the revolutionary rebels "liberated" Old Huang, classifying him among the revolutionary cadres. They returned the typewriter to him.

His mother-in-law, my aunt, was a superstitious housewife. Believing that "this tricky machine of foreign devils" was the demon who killed her daughter, she insisted on destroying it. While Old Huang didn't believe in demons, he did not want to keep a typewriter which reminded him of his wife's tragic death. So he gave it to me when I happened to visit them.

I'd always dreamed of having a typewriter. Though I had studied in the English department at teachers' college, I'd hardly had the chance to touch a typewriter there. After graduation I became a teacher at a commune middle school, where a typewriter was totally out of the question. Therefore, though I knew it might get me into trouble, I accepted the gift. I carried the machine back to my school in secret, wrapped it in my winter clothes within a locked suitcase, and stashed the case beneath my bed.

Due to the Cultural Revolution, our school had not held classes for more than a year now. And it seemed there would be no end to the revolution. In our province, all the mass organizations had divided into two factions—the Red Flags and the Red Stars. Both factions declared their loyalty to the great leader Chairman Mao Tse-tung. Yet, they had countless quarrels with each other. For instance, the Red Flags supported the former provincial Party Secretary as chairman of the Provincial Revolutionary Committee which was soon to be established, but the Red Stars accused him of being a capitalist-roader, and supported the former governor of the province. At first the two factions fought with pens and tongues—in what was known as *wendou* (verbal struggle). Then they fought with fists, swords and spears, and finally with rifles, machine-guns, dynamite and mortars. People invented a new word, *wudou* (violent struggle), to name this phenomenon. At our school, most teachers and students belonged to the Red Star Faction; but in our commune, as in the whole province, the overwhelming majority were Red Flags. In our commune there were seldom violent confrontations between the two factions. Even so, after the *wudou* broke out elsewhere, a few local Red Star activists mysteriously disappeared, while most of the others fled. Now there remained behind only two persons who had ever been Red Stars. I was one of them.

Not that I didn't fear death. I stayed only because I believed the commune was safer than anywhere else I could go. I had arrived at the commune from teachers' college only a few months

before the Cultural Revolution began, and I had no political ambitions at all. So I didn't have any enemies among my colleagues. Being a mild-tempered man, I had never been harsh to students. Since the very start of the Cultural Revolution, I had never done anyone any harm, nor had anyone ever done harm to me. I had joined the Red Star Faction, but only in name, because most of my colleagues at the school were also members. And after two months I quit.

I secretly attributed my quitting to having studied Chairman Mao's works. In those years, if anybody did anything good, certainly in public he or she would claim it was due to Mao Tse-tung Thought. For example, a young country doctor once successfully removed a huge tumor from an old woman's abdomen. He declared it was Mao Tse-tung Thought that had bestowed upon him the courage and skill to perform the surgery; and the patient said it was the Chairman Mao's quotations read to her that had given her the vitality to endure the operation.

I wasn't sure whether my quitting was good or not, but I did have to admit it was due to studying the supreme instruction—Chairman Mao's words. I was suddenly enlightened one day while reading over this quotation: " A revolution is not a dinner party... it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence"

If a faction, no matter whether Red Flag or Red Star, was defeated in the revolution, the victors should not treat them like guests at a dinner party. I didn't want to be treated or treat others

violently, so I quit the Red Star Faction and became a nonfaction-person. In the light of Chairman Mao's works, I guessed that middle-of-the-roaders would always be the people whom the revolutionaries would try to win over. Therefore while the winners in the revolution might not award a medal to a middle element, it was unlikely that they would touch him.

I had other reasons to feel safe staying in the commune. I was somewhat useful to the Red Flags. Within the ranks of our commune, I could call myself a calligrapher and painter. Now and then, the Red Flags would ask me to write slogans or paint pictures, mainly portraits of Chairman Mao. My works appeared on the walls all over little Willow Wood Town, in which the commune government, as well as our school, were located.

Of course, I was not so naive as to think my safety was guaranteed. But I had one more thing in my favor—a sort of "political umbrella." The head of the Red Flags of the commune, Liao Zhi-gao, was a fan of the board game known as *weiqi*, or go. But among the twenty thousand residents in the commune, there were only two or three other persons who played this game. I was one of them. Liao and I played together often, so we came to know each other quite well. You could even say we became friends. Now and then, we would have a chat, even a drink together. Needless to say, he tried to persuade me to join his faction. But I declined in a roundabout fashion, saying I still needed time to think it over.

"Don't think anymore!" he said. "Vice Commander-in-Chief Lin Biao teaches us: 'We must carry out all of Chairman Mao's

instructions, regardless of whether we understand them or not.' Chairman Mao asks us to join the Cultural Revolution, and we must respond to his great call, enthusiastically and unreservedly. You intellectuals always think you are wise enough to hold your own opinions. It is nauseating. That's why people call you 'stinking' intellectuals. It is also dangerous. Don't you know that's why Emperor Chin buried the scholars alive? This kind of self-opinionated attitude is totally wrong. That's why we want to remold your ideology."

However, he didn't bother me too frequently with this sort of rhetoric. To give him his due, this young man was rather kind to me. On his own initiative, he assured me that he would watch out for my safety.

Therefore, while people were busying themselves with fighting or fleeing, I remained at leisure. I had no teaching work to do, yet received every cent of my salary. To kill time, I hung around a lot with some of my former students, who were about ten years younger than me. We swam, fished, hunted birds, and played basketball. One of them, Li Guo-ping, even became my close friend.

Li Guo-ping had finished all his courses and examinations in junior middle school just before the Cultural Revolution began and now, like all of his classmates, he was still waiting for the graduation diploma. He was the cleverest boy I'd ever met. But to a couple of my fellow-teachers, he had been a trouble-maker who embarrassed them a great deal by pointing out their mistakes, asking questions they couldn't answer, and arguing with them—in

class! I had to say that most of my colleagues had never gone to college and were not really qualified to teach middle school. But a few of them feigned excellence and treated students as if they themselves were wise men and the students idiots. If a student dared to show he saw through them, the teachers were furious. They took revenge on the student by punishing him unfairly or even trying to ruin his future. As a matter of fact, in Li Guo-ping's file, which was supposed to follow him for his lifetime and which he himself would never have a chance to read, the teacher in charge of Li's class had added a fabricated charge concerning his political behaviour, recommending that senior middle schools not accept him.

The Great Cultural Revolution gave students a chance to get even with the teachers they hated. They criticized, struggled against, tortured, even killed the teachers. As for the teachers themselves, either out of revolutionary zeal and hatred, or simply to save their own skins, they vied with each other in exposing each other's dirty linen. Any improprieties of the past were brought to light. This made their own time much harder. More and more teachers became "monsters and demons." And struggle sessions against them were held one after the other.

Yet surprisingly, Li Guo-ping never raised a finger to any teacher, even when it came to light that one of them could have ruined his future. After we became friends, out of curiosity I asked Li if he hated that teacher and why he hadn't taken revenge on him.

"Of course I hate the fucking bastard," he answered. "But if I kill him, it will happen in a man-to-man duel, not when his hands are bound."

That's why I respected him and chose him as my close friend, despite the fact that he was only seventeen. You didn't have to take precautions that such a boy would stab you in the back. In those days, such a person was so hard to find. But once you found one, you could feel the world wasn't quite as perilous a place as you had thought.

To be Li Guo-ping's friend, however, didn't always make you feel safe, because in his mind were too many unusual questions which could get both of you in trouble. For instance, he once asked me:

"Every morning the Central People's Radio station begins broadcasting with a song, 'The East is Red,' which tells us Chairman Mao is the great savior of the people. But every night the same station finishes broadcasting with another song, 'The Internationale,' which says there is no such a thing as a savior. Which song tells the truth, and which song shall we listen to?"

Millions and millions of people listened to these two songs every day, but I bet few of them had ever entertained such a question. Though I strongly felt that too much thinking could get this boy, and even the people associated with him, into trouble, I simply could not help secretly admiring him. I treated him more as my classmate than my student.

Li Guo-ping liked me, I guessed, because I was easy-going and honest. Whenever he asked me about something I didn't know, I

simply admitted it. This did not hurt his respect for me one bit. He said I was the "most learned person in the commune." It might have been because I could tell him stories I'd learned from foreign books which were certainly not available to a country boy, even before the Cultural Revolution. And since the revolution began, practically the only books one could find were written by Chairman Mao. Li pestered me to tell him stories whenever he had an opportunity. I had to tax my memory to the limit to satisfy him. He liked Sherlock Holmes, Robin Hood and the Knights of the Round Table. But he was more fascinated by the real-life stories of self-made persons like Michael Faraday, Marie Curie, and Jack London.

We became closer and closer. I forgot the difference between our ages and discussed all kinds of topics with him. I even shared the secret of the typewriter with him.

It happened one evening, when everyone else living in the school dormitory had gone out to watch a show staged by the County Performing Arts Propaganda Team. I stayed home to eat a chicken I'd bought from the fair that day. I invited Guc-ping to join me. After drinking half a bottle of wine, I lost caution and showed him the typewriter, while telling him the tragedy of my cousin Mei-yin.

I could see the tears shining in his eyes. But the story didn't scare him away from the "killer" machine. With trembling fingers, he slowly printed out a sentence : "I want to study!"

Then he told me excitedly that he wanted to study everything that was supposed to be taught in senior middle school and in

university. He asked me to teach him English and any other subjects I could. He said he had had this idea in his mind for quite a long time but had felt too embarrassed to ask my help.

I was touched by his earnestness. I promised to do my best to help him, but I didn't see how English could do him any good. Li Guo-ping argued English was the first thing he wanted to learn.

Obviously, it was the wine and the fact that I had shared my own secret with him which encouraged him to open his heart totally to me. He said that sooner or later he would certainly go to college, even if the Chinese ones were closed forever. He believed some university somewhere in the world would accept him. That's why he wanted so badly to master English.

I almost covered his mouth with my hand. What he had said was enough to put him into labor camp for several years. Yet, though frightened by his words, I simply could not say no. I agreed to teach him on one condition: he would never mention why he wanted to learn English again. I scrounged up an English-Chinese dictionary, and a copy of *Essential English* with the last ten or fifteen pages missing, and bought two copies of the English version of *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-tung*. When we had our classes we usually went to some remote site near a brook or river fishing at the same time. In case we were found out, we would say we were learning Chairman Mao's works in English. Since the leadership proclaimed that we Chinese would soon liberate the whole world, we wanted to be ready to propagate Mao Tse-tung Thought among the foreigners who didn't speak Chinese.

Half a year earlier, no matter what our pretext, if we had done anything involving the "imperialist language," English, somebody would surely have found out about it through spying and gotten us into real trouble. But it didn't seem likely now, because the revolutionaries had much more fiendish enemies at hand to deal with, and more exciting business to occupy their attention. In Liuzhou City, which was less than 100 kilometers away, the *wudou* had escalated into fierce urban warfare. The Red Stars occupied the southern part of the city; the Red Flags encircled them. Thousands more Red Flag fighters were being sent there from neighbouring counties. My go partner, Liao Zhi-gao, whom I had not seen for quite a while, was in command of reconnaissance on the front. He became a legendary hero. It was said that he and his girlfriend, who was a cadre at a neighboring commune, had slipped into the enemy headquarters in disguise, and set off an explosion, killing 24 Red Stars as well as their vice-commander. I heard a rumor that for his military exploit, Liao Zhi-gao was promised a very important position in the county revolutionary committee.

During those months together, Guo-ping learned very fast; I took the teaching more seriously than a paid job. Inspired by him, I also had a strong desire to improve my English. I began to listen to the English broadcasting on the B.B.C. and V.O.A., secretly and always with earphones. Gradually, I understood more and more. As both of us made daily progress, we felt very happy. Sometimes, I thought we were escaping from the real world and

poisoning ourselves with something akin to opium. But at the same time, the more we learned, the closer I felt we were to another world, in which it was legal for a student to learn and a teacher to teach, in which one did not have to kill or be killed. I could hardly tell which of the two worlds was more real—the one we were in, or the one we tried to escape to. Were both unreal? Perhaps one of them was an illusion, the other a nightmare? I wished the illusion could last.

Unfortunately, the illusion didn't last. It came to an end with Liao Zhi-gao's death. One day, Liao, his girlfriend, and five other fighters fell into an ambush. Four of his men died in battle, and he himself received a severe head wound. His girlfriend and another fighter carried him and fought their way out. But before they reached the hospital, Liao died. Two days later, his body was sent back to our commune. His coffin was displayed in the meeting hall of our school.

It was a fair spring day. But the atmosphere of Little Willow Wood Town was dismal, as if the sky was clouded with hatred and the air rank with fear. Not a single smiling face was to be found. The children were forbidden to play by their parents. On the walls appeared slogans, such as "Debts of Blood Must Be Paid in Blood! We Vow to Avenge Martyr Liao Zhi-gao!" and "Smash the Red Star Bandits' Lair! Exterminate the Red Stars!"

An ominous foreboding overwhelmed me. The typewriter beneath my bed made me feel I was lying on a time bomb. It could give a ready-made excuse for punitive action by the Red

Flags, who were wild for revenge. I thought of dropping it into the river which was a few hundred yards from my place. But I held back, partly because I was afraid that I had been watched already, mainly because I hated to get rid of it. At the same time, however, I regretted having accepted it. I even went so far as to think that I'd been obsessed by it, and that my aunt was right: the typewriter was a killing demon. While I was wringing my hands not knowing what to do, Li Guo-ping appeared. He offered to hide the typewriter in his own house. His family origin was poor peasant, he said, and his uncle was both a Red Flag and cadre at the commune. Nobody would search their house. Moreover, his parents were upright and kind-hearted persons. They respected me very much. Under no circumstance would they betray me.

Fearing that Ji and his family would be involved in trouble, I refused, but he insisted. Before we reached an agreement, two Red Flags appeared suddenly at the door of my room. My heart pounded violently, as if it would jump out from my mouth.

The two men were indeed looking for me. What they said, however, calmed down my heart-beat. They handed me a photograph of Liao, asking me to make a large charcoal portrait from it.

"We'll bring you a frame in a couple of hours," one of them said. "As soon as you finish the portrait, please put it in the frame and carry it to the mourning hall." Then they left.

I must have been over-sensitive, I thought. It didn't look as if the Red Flags would avenge Liao's death upon a former Red Star like me. But Li still insisted that it would be safer to hide the

typewriter in his house. Finally I gave my consent. After it was dark, he took it away.

By the time I finished the portrait, it was already about ten p.m. I brought it to the mourning hall. A guard put the portrait in front of Liao's vermilion coffin.

The hall was dimly lit by yellowish electric lights. Before the coffin, several candles and scores of incense sticks were burning. The scent, mixed with a subtle foul smell, filled the air. On the floor, dozens of wreaths stood in rows. Many blue cloth sheets were hung on the walls, serving as backdrops to elegiac couplets and mourning phrases written on white paper. Several sheets repeated the same sentence: "Comrade Liao Zhi-gao lives on!"

I too hardly believed that he was really dead. The good times we had had together flashed through my mind; sadness and sorrow gripped my heart. I stared at the portrait. If he was not handsome, he at least had regular features. Unlike an ordinary country youth whose facial muscles would freeze before a camera, he was smiling. And his smile was so self-confident, even conceited. At the time, he had had every reason to smile. But now, he was dead, rotting in a coffin behind the smiling portrait. What a cruel joke Fate made! Hanging my head, I was lost in black thought.

"Kneel down!" a woman yelled. Before I realized that I was the one being addressed, somebody gave me a sharp kick on the back of the knee. I lost my balance and fell down. Then I found that two men had been pushed into the hall and forced to kneel

beside me. They were Lin Yong-ge and Wei Cheng. Lin was a political science teacher at our school, who once had also been a Red Star. Wei was a Mathematics teacher at the primary school of the commune, who had never been a Red Star or a Red Flag but who had shown a strong preference for the Red Star Faction.

"Do you know why you are kneeling here?" the woman shouted. The hatred in her hoarse voice turned my heart into ice. She was none other than Liao's girlfriend. I had seen her once but she did not know me personally.

"I know, I know,"—words gushed out from Lin's mouth without a pause—"I know I'm guilty of the most heinous crime, for which I deserve to die ten thousand deaths and even that cannot atone my sins. But I know the consistent policy of the Communist Party is leniency to those who confess their crimes, and severity to those who refuse to confess; it is a merit for a criminal to expose other criminals. I want to expiate my crimes by good deeds. I want to report these two men to you. I want to expose them both! I have kept a careful watch on them for a long time. He—" Lin pointed one hand at me, while the other hand fumbled in his pocket and took out a little note-book. "—He is a reactionary , an enemy spy!"

It must be because of the damn typewriter, I thought. It could do great harm to Guo-ping and his parents as well!

"He dupes and corrupts students," Lin continued. "He propagates Feudalism, Capitalism and Revisionism! Here are the details." He consulted his note-book. "Up to yesterday, he has

shared ten chickens and four ducks with students, in order to win them over. The most serious crimes he has committed—"

"Shut up!" Liao Zhi-gao's girl friend snapped. Evidently she was in no mood to listen. "We don't need your babbling. Our eyes are discerning. We know everything each of you has done. Because of your crimes, I, on behalf of the Middle and Poor Peasant Supreme Court, sentence the three of you to death. The execution will be tomorrow, at Martyr Liao's funeral."

"You can't do this to me!" Lin sprang up and howled. "I'm a Communist Party member. I'm a Red Flag! I have followed the Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao closely, all along!"

One of the guards jabbed Lin in the kidneys with his rifle butt. It knocked Lin to the ground and silenced his hysteria. Whining miserably, he prostrated himself before the girl, and begged: "Mercy! Please give me a chance. Zhi-gao and I are relatives. My great aunt married his grandfather."

"Pooh!" the girl spit at Lin. "You don't deserve to be his relative, you shameless bastard! Shut your mouth or I'll kill you at once."

At once Lin Yong-ge became mute. Wei Cheng's thick lips twitched, but no words came from his mouth. I myself was nearly paralyzed and speechless. I knew it was useless to say anything.

They tied our hands behind our backs. "Kneel there and don't move," the young woman ordered. She and the guards walked out of the hall. The door was locked from the outside. We three were left in the company of the Martyr, waiting to be buried along with him.

Wei Cheng sat beside me, his back against the wall, his head bent to his knees. Sobbing, he mumbled as if to some invisible persons. A few feet away from us, Lin lay on his side, whining. His face was waxen, with tears running. The crotch of his pants was wet and stained with dust. Suddenly, I thought they looked so funny. I couldn't help imagining how I myself looked.... it must have been funny, too. Somewhere I had once picked up a statement by Samuel Beckett, "The funniest thing is unhappy." It had remained in my memory because I'd thought it was absolute nonsense. Now I came to realize how right he was!

Wei Cheng would die, at least partly because he'd showed too much preference for the Red Star Faction. However, the Red Stars had never rewarded him with any favors. They had refused to accept him as a member because of a "stain" on his record, which he himself had brought about in 1950, when he was only 13.

In that year, rebelling bandits occupied Wei's home town, a small mountain village, and took all the residents as hostages, including Wei Cheng. Only a few days later, the Liberation Army smashed the rebels and released the hostages. This whole incident didn't give Wei any trouble for years, until a political movement called "Four Check-into," which had begun a couple years earlier than the Cultural Revolution. The nationwide movement was supposed to clean things up in the fields of politics, economy, organization and ideology. Everybody had to confess all kinds of

wrongdoings and wrong thoughts. Being an extremely earnest man, Wei Cheng confessed that he had done an "evil deed" during the bandit rebellion in 1950: he had assisted the bandits in caring for their wounded, because one of them was his cousin. This confession stained his 'til-then spotless record. After the Cultural Revolution broke out, the stain grew, totally blackening his political colour. He had to hang a board labeled "Bandit and Historical Counter-revolutionary Element Wei Cheng" around his neck, and clean toilets at the school as well as in the commune administration building every day. As always, he devoted all his body and soul to his work. The toilets became so clean that I hadn't been able to refrain from commenting to Li Guo-ping: "Even if only on account of this aspect, we can see the necessity of the 'unprecedented' Great Cultural Revolution. Without it, would it be possible for these toilets to be so unprecedentedly clean?"

Wasn't Wei's life-story both unhappy and funny?

Lin Yong-ge's case was a different story, though it was also funny. He was a Communist Party member and had a good family origin—poor peasant. He was a willing activist, who always kept abreast of the latest political events. Above all, he was an unequalled source of information. People said he knew everything, from what was going on in Zhongnanhai, Peking, where the highest Chinese leaders lived, to what was cooking in a colleague's wok; you could do nothing "improper" without it being recorded in his note-book, which he always brought everywhere with him.

One thing Lin had never lacked was the favour of the leadership. Once, he had even reached the top rank among the Red Flags in our commune. However, he quit the faction and joined the Red Stars, because Premier Zhou En-lai had once called The Red Star Faction a "revolutionary organization" but the Red Flag faction only a "mass organization."

Lin Yong-ge not only quit, he "turned his weapon around and struck"—revealing scandals among the Red Flags. After some time, however, the Red Flags were still in power and in favor with those above. Perhaps certain other top-ranking leaders didn't share Premier Zhou's opinions about the faction. Or had Premier Zhou himself changed his own mind? A humble person like myself could never answer such a question. But Lin Yong-ge this time quit the Red Star Flag faction, once again turned his weapon around and struck. He accused the Red Stars of being reactionary bandits, and applied to rejoin the Red Flag Faction. Many Red Flags wanted to reject and punish him. But Liao Zhi-gao, who was quite a tolerant man, pardoned him and accepted him.

Lin's given name, Yong-ge, which he'd adopted at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, meant "revolutionary forever." Indeed he had always been a revolutionary or at least had wanted to be a revolutionary. This revolutionary person was now to die a "counter-revolutionary" death. Wasn't it terribly funny?

Lin's whine turned into a loud groan. His body huddled up.

"Are you all right?" Wei asked him.

"My legs are twitching."

With his shoulder against the wall, Wei stood up. He stopped the cramp by kicking Lin's soles.

A guard with a pockmarked face came in, asking, "What's the noise?"

Wei Cheng explained, and begged, "Could you give him some water? Please!"

"What? Water for him?" With disbelief the pockmarked one looked at Wei, then at Lin. Without saying yes or no, he left.

About fifteen minutes later, he returned with a water bottle. He unbound Wei's hands and gave the water to him. "This is for you," he said. "Not for that fucking bastard."

Then turning aside, the guard made for the door.

Wei Cheng helped Lin Yong-ge to sit up, and put the bottle to his lips. Lin gulped and gulped; fresh tears ran down his already-stained cheeks.

"Thank ...you....I...I..." Lin tried to say something, but was choked with sobs.

Suddenly the contempt for Lin disappeared from my heart, leaving only pity. I might have been too hard on this poor fellow, I told myself. Whatever he'd done was just to get favor from the leadership, just to be revolutionary. And whatever he had done, he did not deserve death.

Before he himself drank, Wei came to me, bent over, and said to me softly: "Take some water, Little Zhang, take some, please."

Watching him putting the bottle to my lips, I couldn't hold back my tears. They gushed from my eyes, running down my

face and dropping on my chest. Oh, Old Wei, Old Wei, how could Fate be so cruel to such a good man like you!

Through my tears, I saw Liao's portrait. His smile now had turned into a hideous smirk. He was a killer! I hated him! He had killed so many people. Now he was going to kill us as well. He was grinning at us—his victims. Yet he had no cause to grin. He himself was a victim too! He was dead, rotting and stinking in the coffin. His fiancée would sleep with other men. Even the fiancée-widow was a victim, too. She could kill us and bury us with her lover. But could she revive him? What's more, who could say that someday a bullet wouldn't dash out her own brains? Ha, ha! Funny, funny, it was really funny. All of us —the killed, the about-to-be-killed, and the killers—all of us were nothing but victims! What a practical joke!

Some great persons had said that the Cultural Revolution was a grand manoeuvre for emancipating all mankind. Would all mankind have to go through this? Would they want to be emancipated in such a way?

Perhaps there were too many people in China. Even if we wiped out half our population, there would still be enough manpower to liberate the other peoples of the world. Therefore, the lives of people like Wei, Lin and me were dirt cheap.

Who were we? The enemies of the laboring people? On the contrary, we belonged to the laboring people, we were the proclaimed masters of the country. It was unspeakably funny that the death of the masters of the country could be so cheap, or, in

the words of the well-known saying now so frequently used by the revolutionaries, it could be "lighter than a goose-feather."

If Szuma Chien, who had made the famous remark that a death could be heavier than Mount Tai or lighter than a goose-feather, were still alive, would he think the death of people like us was lighter than a feather? Surely he would not. The people who used his remark, did they know its original meaning? Szuma Chien himself was a victim of tyranny! Years after he had been castrated by the Emperor for speaking out in defence of an acquaintance, Szuma Chien wrote this comment in bitterness, to an innocent friend who was about to be executed!

I wished in the future there would be a historian as great as Szuma Chien, who would say unmistakably something like this:

Any innocent and unnecessary death should be heavier than Mount Tai. No one should have the right to think any other human being's life, even an enemy's life, is as light as a feather. Otherwise, those in power will be able to wipe out anyone in their way, just by labeling them class enemies and reactionaries.

Would ever such a historian appear? Would he ever know that in such a great country, under such a perfect social system, there once had been so many insignificant people who died so insignificantly? Or even if he knew the truth, would he have any chance to let people listen to him?

Anyhow, it would not make any difference to me, because tomorrow I would die. I still had a few hours to live. Why should I bother myself with the future? What's more, I shouldn't think of anything sentimental, like missing my poor mother. Let me just

try to enjoy the last moments of my short life, by imagining myself doing something I should most like to do. How about making love to a girl? But I didn't know what that was really like. Though I was 26 years old, the most sexual thing I'd ever done was to kiss my former college sweetheart a few times. What a shame! If I could have known I would die so young, and in such a way, I would have certainly behaved differently. I began to recall what the girl and I had done together and imagined I did something more exciting. However, it gave me no pleasure, only sadness.

Finally, I imagined I was writing my life story with the typewriter. The final chapter was about my own death.

How would I die? Would they shoot me, beat me to death, or find some more cruel way? A couple of weeks earlier, eyewitnesses had described a savage and bloody real-life scene to me. It repeated itself in my mind's eye, like a play now performed by a different cast:

I was tied to a pole. Liao's girlfriend stabbed a sharp, shining dagger into my chest. My blood gushed out. She opened my chest, and seized out my still-beating heart. The mob, like a swarm of wasps, dashed to my body and cut off my flesh bit by bit with pieces of broken glass and china.

Scared by my own imagination, I could be cynical or philosophical no more. I was shaking violently. Sweat broke out all over my body. My hands and feet were as cold as ice. Though I kept telling myself to pass my last few hours like a man, it simply didn't stop my shaking. I called myself a coward and

forced myself to erase the chilling pictures from my mind. But they appeared more vivid.

I actually felt pain at this point. But it was due to a humming swarm of mosquitos which kept attacking me. Their sound was more annoying than their bite. It reminded me of a struggle rally before a person's execution, where there was always a lot of vehement condemnation of the soon-to-be-killed, and many rhetorical speeches justifying the killing.

"Fuck you!" I cursed aloud, then muttered: "If you want my blood, just suck since I'm tied up, but don't tell me you are serving a great cause and leading me to Paradise!"

The imaginary pictures turned into a movie-like illusion, accompanied by a voice which said:

"Look, this woman is cutting the flesh from the bone, with a piece of broken china bowl, bit by bit. She puts the flesh into the out-stretched hands of her son, the skinny sickly-looking boy. The flesh will be cooked on a piece of pottery tile. It is believed the flesh can make the boy healthy and strong. It is also believed that the flesh must not be touched with metal, or it will lose its magic tonic and healing power.

"In the last a few months, cannibalism has become fairly common in certain areas in this province, especially Wuxuan County. Not everybody who eats human flesh does so for medical purposes. Some just do it to show off their bravery, or their hatred for enemies. Some do it simply for fun."

The illusion continued:

Newcomers arrive at the killing field. "Better late than never," says a man, picking up a few bones from the pool of my blood. Some bones are still joined by sinews. "They will make a wonderful soup."

I couldn't stand any more. I felt sick and vomited violently. I smelled foul, and found that the crotch of my pants was wet. Soon I fell into a state of half-consciousness.

"Get up!" Somebody kicked me, grabbed the rope which bound my hands behind my back, and pulled me up to my feet. Two armed young men escorted me to the commune administration building. I was shoved into an office. The number-two-turned-number-one Red Flag in our commune, Old Chen, was sitting behind a desk. At his side, stood Li Guo-ping's uncle.

"Zhang Le-tian," Old Chen shouted at me. "You must make a clean breast of your reactionary criminal activities."

"I've never once committed a crime." I answered defiantly. Since I was going to die, I didn't bother giving consideration to my manner of speech.

"Confess your crimes or I'll kill you! You cunning spy." Old Chen slapped the desk. "I tell you, we know what you really are. You are not only a Red Star agent but also a spy in the service of the foreign master! We have human testimony and material evidence." He picked up something up from beside his chair and put it on the desk. It was nothing else but the typewriter.

I was stunned. Surely, Li Guo-ping had betrayed me. I didn't care what this would cause me since I was about to be killed

anyway. What broke my heart was that, in this world, one could trust absolutely no one; one could not believe in anything. Not anything! My lips twitched, but I couldn't utter a word.

Before I recovered from the shock, Li Guo-ping's uncle leapt on me. "I know why you are silent," he snapped. " You want to die so that your collaborators can remain at large." Striding towards me, he added slowly and clearly: "But we will not let you die so soon, so easily. We have already reported you to the county authorities. We'll send you to the county seat. There I bet you'll tell the whole truth."

Now the truth dawned upon me, Li Guo-ping and his uncle were trying to save my life!

"I'm willing to write down all I know," I said. To write meant that I could get some time to consider.

Old Chen threw a pad of paper and a pen on the desk. Guo-ping's uncle untied my numb hands. They left, posting a guard at the door of the office.

The night was still. A clock in the building struck three. Somewhere outside in the dark, an owl began to hoot.

Facing the blank paper, I could do nothing but scratch the back of my head. Which "master" should I pick? CIA or KGB? Who were my "collaborators"? Anything I wrote could be used against me, and my false incriminations could ruin innocent people. But on the other hand, I had to write something, or else I would certainly be beaten up before they sent me to the county seat.

Finally, an inspired idea got me out of the dilemma. Chairman Mao taught us, "Every kind of thinking, without exception, is

stamped with the brand of a class." So every action should certainly have its class and historical root. Why didn't I begin with the popular method of criticizing, "digging deeply the historical root"?

I began with writing from memory a couple of Chairman Mao's quotations as the guideline of my "confession." Next, I exposed my "reactionary historical roots"—the crimes committed by one of my forefathers who had taken part in the war to put down the Taiping Revolution in 1851. In fact, to my knowledge, he was the only member of my clan who ever committed any reactionary crime. I criticized this alleged criminal act of my great-great-grandfather from the angle of class struggle. I based my arguments as much as I could on Mao Tse-tung Thought, making the style as elaborate and wordy as possible. Even before I was born on the paper, the first light of morning appeared. Soon they took away what I'd written, and loaded me and my "transmitter" aboard a truck, bound for the county seat.

The truck bumped along the dirt road. Thanks to a rain-shower before dawn, it wasn't at all dusty. I greedily breathed the fresh moist air, and looked around. Distant mountains were capped with white clouds. In the morning sun, rice shimmered a translucent green; blossoming rape fields were almost luminously yellow. A moss-tinged stone bridge stretched over a swift brook. A huge banyan tree, aged but still full of vitality, shaded the bridge with an evergreen canopy. Sitting beneath the tree, a young woman, with her breast exposed, was suckling her baby.

Her bare feet were dangling into the water. Beside her, was a basket of clothes and a washing club. Steps away, a little boy was stalking something—perhaps a cricket or a butterfly.

What a peaceful scene! The world had never seemed so beautiful to me. Tears welled in my eyes. I almost cried out, "Oh, people, please do something to make this world a better place to live! Don't let these people become killers or victims!"

I felt a strong impulse to do something to make a brighter future for them as well. But my hands, numb from being bound, mocked me; my own ominous future loomed in my mind. Very likely, the county authorities would know that my typewriter was not a transmitter; they might send me back to the commune. What should I do? What could I do?

I was led into an interrogation room. "Oh no," I groaned in my heart. "I am finished now." An army officer was typing on the typewriter, using all his fingers, though slowly.

He held up his head and measured me with his eyes. Unexpectedly, I read sympathy and a faint sadness in his gaze. He was about the same age as me, fairer than most soldiers I'd seen. And his heavy-lidded slant eyes and stalwart body showed that he might be from the north.

The man who escorted me had left. Now there were only the officer and me in the room.

"Sit down," he said, with a wry smile. "I used to own this same kind of typewriter myself. I dreamed of being a diplomat, but

I've become a soldier." He grinned bitterly again. "Tell me, what's this nonsense."

"Please don't send me back," I begged. "Please put me in jail." I told him what had happened to me.

The young officer listened to me silently, while idly playing with a pen in his hands. When I finished, he was still quiet, as if lost in his own thoughts.

With a sigh he broke the silence. "All right," he concluded. "I can put you into jail for a while." He looked into my eyes earnestly. "I'm terribly sorry. But this is all I can do."

He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands in a gesture of resignation, whispering in English, "Sorry, but...good luck!"

In the county jail I lived a peaceful life for almost ten months. During this period, the Party Central Committee issued a proclamation, ordering the Red Stars to lay down their weapons. Those who refused to surrender were wiped out by The Red Flags, aided by the People's Liberation Army.

When I was set free, not only was the war over, but the "Force 12 Typhoon"—a bloody purge in which countless lives ended in "atypical deaths"—also calmed down. I returned to the school and no one touched a single hair on my head.

Wei Cheng and Lin Yong-ge were far from being as lucky as I was. On the same day I was sent to the county seat, they were killed at Liao Zhi-gao's funeral. Lin Yong-ge was bound to a pack of dynamite, and blasted to pieces. Wei Cheng was buried

alive with Liao's coffin laid upon his body, leaving behind a pregnant wife and two orphans. The widow was obliged to pay for the excutioners' job; they took away her only hog as a "burial fee."

Without the typewriter, I would have certainly disappeared from the face of the earth that day. So I had to say that hardly before I typed anything on it, the typewriter itself substituted a comma for the final period of my personal history.

Fifteen years later, the government returned to their owners all remaining objects that had been illegally confiscated during the Cultural Revolution. The typewriter was sent back to me. But it was out of order already. I kept it as a souvenir of those days. Every time I looked at it, guilt mixed with fear overwhelmed me. I felt guilty for not writing something with it, but was too fearful. Hundreds of times I told myself I should make the old machine work again, yet I was glad that it didn't work. It was too appalling to imagine what new role it would play in my life.

Finally, however, this typewriter was put to work. In March 1987, my former student, Li Guo-ping, now a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, came back to visit me. He had realized his pledge. In 1972, Li escaped to Hong Kong. He managed to do well there, and finally received an education in the United States. Now with his wife, a Chinese Canadian, he returned to China for a visit. He spent two days with me, and fixed the typewriter.

As soon as the old machine was ready, I fell under its spell. Poking with two fingers, and wrestling with almost every word, I wrote this story over six painful months. Frequently I felt that it wasn't me but the typewriter itself which was writing, or that I was guided by the spirits of countless people like Wei Cheng, Lin Yong-ge, even Liao Zhi-gao. Liao's death hadn't turned out to be heavier than Mount Tai. Less than two years after his death, according to the new policy of the Party, his body was dug out from the site for revolutionary martyrs and reburied among others whose deaths had once been described as "lighter than a feather," but now were simply referred to as "atypical."

Several times, I tried to quit writing, because it was too painful for me. However, I always resumed. I knew I would never have peace with myself until I put the final stop to this account.