Build Socialism With Chinese Characteristics [Chp. 12]

Jin did not go out again for days. His long march had inflamed his feet and knees and dizziness struck whenever he moved his head. Nothing pleased him, neither food nor sleep nor television. Zhu offered to take him back to the Army hospital, but Jin did not think the Army doctor could help him. "A ghost is misery itself," he said. "Understand?"

One evening after a bun and a few shreds of chicken, Jin asked Zhu to take him to see Old Han. The excursion failed. Jin could not keep his weight over the bicycle's rear wheel. After he twice nearly pulled Zhu from her seat, they stopped and Jin switched positions, sitting astride the luggage rack instead of the saddle.

"Watch for potholes," he said as a nauseous heat swirled through his trunk and head, "even ghosts have their soft spots."

"You said it," Zhu laughed over her shoulder. They toppled over just short of the railroad tracks. Luckily

they were moving slowly and their quilted clothes cushioned their fall. Zhu picked up her Flying Pigeon but Jin lay curled up on the pavement, revolving in a whirlpool of misery. Let the darkness bury me, he thought.

The next evening, after an interminable day of television, Jin set out with his stick for the Western Suburbs. The road was dark and cold and Jin was limping painfully by the time he reached the railway workers' building. Old Han greeted him at the door with a cigarette in his hand. He seemed unusually tall under the fluorescent lights, but his skin looked taut and dry and he wore a stiff grin. Is he a ghost too? Jin wondered. A defecating ghost?

A drama set during the Resist Japan War was showing on Hebei TV. Young Han sat in an armchair with a book in his lap. Jin greeted him and pulled four bottles of Meixue from his satchel. He closed his eyes as his brain bobbed on the crest of a dizzy wave.

"So they've released you," Han said as he set two glasses on the table. "Why the stick?"

"I seem to have hit my head on the curb," Jin said.

"I suppose it jumped up and popped you," Han grinned.

"I really don't remember," Jin said. "It happened quickly, like a dream. It doesn't matter."

"If public security was involved, I'm sure that's best," Han said.

"No," Jin said earnestly. "It would be better if I had died." His eyes burned. "But then I realized. I died long ago. That's how it is, Old Han. I feel like a ghost. All the time."

Jin studied Han's pinched face and took a gulp of beer. Han sipped and stared at his glass. "When do you think it happened?" he asked. "When you died, I mean?"

"Many times," Jin said, looking at his glass. "Many times. During the Red Terror. So-called. The beating, smashing and looting. When we fought your comrades, probably I was already a ghost."

Han offered Jin a Spring City, lighting one for himself and handing Jin a blue plastic lighter. Jin felt a constriction in his throat. He marveled at Han's goodness. Giving him a cigarette, the lighter. Sitting with him across the table. As if he and Han were still alive. As if they were friends. They smoked together in silence. Han stared in the direction of the television.

Jin noticed that Old Xi was not at home. He heard someone stirring in the other room, probably Young Xi. Han held the cigarette to his eyes, watching the paper and tobacco transformed into ash. He took another drag and tapped the ash into an ashtray.

Jin felt a stab of remorse. Why disturb Old Han with his pitiful, ridiculous ideas? The so-called educated youth had been rounded up and sent into exile. They

labored, struggled, suffered and many never returned. That was how they answered the Chairman's call. The revolutionary workers —— the Workers' Command, the One Million Workers, their allies —— well, they were not invited to "climb the mountain." Han turned and looked at Jin. His face was drained of blood.

"We were eaten by tigers," he said in a rasping whisper, his eyes peering into Jin's. Jin shuddered. He waited for Han to explain. Han said nothing. Jin's eyes stung with poison. "We were eaten by tigers," Han said again.

Jin wiped his eyes. "We died because he lived," he said, choking down a sob. He refilled their glasses and waited for the sob to pass. "Ai, it's a great pity." They raised their glasses in a silent toast, emptied them. Jin refilled them. "Maybe it wasn't tigers," Jin said eagerly. "In my case, I think it was a pig."

Han threw back his head and drew deeply on his cigarette. He sat with his throat exposed, as if he were offering it to a barber. He stood and paced the room, stopping now and then to stare at the television, then settled on the back of the armchair where Young Han sat with his book. Old Han dropped his eyes and rested his hand on the back of his son's neck, which he caressed two, three, four times before raising his face to Jin.

"Old Han," Jin said, "I want to see your photographs."

Han glared and his thin mustache seemed to twitch. “Do you love this misery so much?” he asked. “That was long ago. Another world, another life. Aren’t you concerned about ‘unnecessary attention to past mistakes’?” Jin said nothing. “I should have burned them long ago,” Han said. “I can burn them now.”

Han hopped from the back of the armchair and threw his cigarette to the floor. He disappeared into the bedroom, where Jin heard the sliding door of a cabinet. Young Xi said something Jin did not understand. Han reappeared in the bedroom doorway holding a crushed red box bound with twine. He set it on the table and began picking the knots with trembling fingers. Jin put his hand over Han’s.

“Old Han, I won’t let you burn them,” Jin said with a tense grin.

“Why not?”

Young Xi stood in the doorway, her arms crossed on her chest. Young Han stood beside the armchair, his book dangling at his side. Jin pulled back his hand.

“Do you want them to make the same mistakes we made?” he asked, nodding at the children. “Or when they’re older, do you want them to let their own children go mad?”

Han bent over the knots. “They’ve seen them,” he said. “They won’t forget. I hope they’ll have the courage to fight for justice in their time. I hope we do.”

"Right, good," Jin said. "I'm sure they won't forget, though they probably should look at them every year. But I haven't seen them and Xingxing hasn't seen them. Someday I want to be able explain to him what happened in those days."

Han looked up with a familiar mocking smile. "Ah. Maybe you can tell me, Old Jin. What happened?"

"When I know. Then I'll tell him as well as I can."

"Mm, I don't know," Han said. "Maybe you'll just tell him how the Red Mansion drove the Workers' Command from the Ancient Lotus Pool Academy. Wasn't that the high tide of your Revolution? Your Huai-Hai Campaign?"

"That means nothing," Jin said.

"Maybe you'll tell him how many of our comrades were arrested by your allies and tried by the Army as counterrevolutionaries."

Jin shivered. "We thought of them as prisoners of war," Jin said. Han peered sadly at him. "But it was madness," Jin added. "The madness of wild beasts."

"You mean it wasn't a war to consolidate the proletarian dictatorship? To 'purify class ranks'? To 'protect the emperor'? Well, Old Jin, I can see that you are not someone whose inconsequence has wasted eighteen springs."

"We were told to take class struggle as the key link," Jin said. "Now socialist modernization is the key link.

As I said," he dropped his voice, "We died because he lived." Han shook his head and got up from the table. He returned with a small knife.

"I need to see the photos," Jin said slowly. "Other people also need to see them." Han was slashing the twine from the cardboard box, which once had contained the famous Tianjin candy. "It's this way, Old Han," Jin said gravely. "We need your photographs. We need them to fix the objective reality of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. So called. To preserve it. Otherwise, Old Han, otherwise —— each of us goes mad in his own prison!" Jin flushed. What nonsense! Could photographs lay the miserable dead to rest? Bring the dead to life? Could a picture counteract the girl-knight's poison?

"I understand, but why do I have to keep them?" Han asked. "Why do I have to be the King of Hell for Baoding?"

"You're not the only one, Old Han. But I'll keep them if you don't want to."

Young Xi spoke from the bedroom doorway. With a kerchief on her head and small round face, she looked like a young nun from the Old Society. "Daddy, I agree with Uncle Jin. Your photographs are a national treasure."

Han chuckled. He called to his son, who had returned to his chair and his book. "What do you say, Comrade? Do we destroy our national treasure? Smash the old and erect

the new, like the so-called educated youth? Or do we pass the family curse on to our comrade?"

"It doesn't matter," Young Han said, taking up the rattan stick and brandishing it half-heartedly like a sword. He was surprisingly timid for a son of Old Han's. "It doesn't matter. I've seen them."

"OK, fine, we won't burn the national treasure," Han said, grinning at Young Xi. "Twenty years later and the Red Guards still won't let us join. It doesn't matter. I'll keep them here."

As soon as he handled the first photograph, Jin felt a violent tightening in his chest. How unfair! Why did he have to be in the first one? Between antique scalloped borders, in harsh black and white, and tiny, like tiny children, Young Jin, Young Zhou, Young Tang, Young Ba, Young Liang, Young Han, Young Xiang, in Army tunics. They gazed with childish sternness over the head of a kneeling man with a paper sign on his chest:
"Counterrevolutionary."

Jin recognized the picture. It was only a few months after the Eight-Eight Sixteen-Point Decision. The Five Revolutionary Comrades had formed the Red Mansion in imitation of the Red Mansion Faction at the Aeronautics Institute in Beijing. With the help of Revolutionary cadres at the school, they were unmasking new revisionists every day. Schoolwork had stopped. There were no

assignments or lectures on academic subjects. The kneeling man was a senior teacher who had spoken against the disruption of studies. The earlier objects of criticism had been former Rightists. This one had not. But in opposing the Cultural Revolution, he revealed that he had harbored anti-socialist, anti-Party feelings all along, and that in reality he yearned for the restoration of capitalism.

"Are you in this one, Uncle Jin?" Young Xi asked from over Jin's shoulder.

"I am," he said softly.

"You look like young soldiers," she said.

"The Chairman's good little Red Guards," Han said.

"We thought we were soldiers," Jin said.

"Your 'object of criticism,' what did he do?" Xi asked.

"He opposed the Cultural Revolution," Jin said. He glanced at nine or ten photos from other struggle meetings, in many of which he figured with his former comrades. Sometimes the camera caught them laughing and smiling. Some long-forgotten joke. This can't be real.

These were followed by photographs of Baoding that had nothing to do with the political movements. Jin was struck by how poor the city had been and by how little it had changed. The faces of the masses were the same, dark and lean, but there were no automobiles. Not even a Volga, not

even an old Shanghai. As if the automobile had not yet been invented. One photo showed an ancient Skoda truck. It must have belonged to a commune.

Another series recorded Red Guards parading their captured class enemies through the city streets and conducting a struggle session at the stadium. The enemies were mostly city and Party cadres, along with Rightists, teachers and some revisionist journalists. No soldiers. Baoding was a garrison city. Although the Chairman had stirred up the fury of the Beijing youth against soldiers he imagined were his enemies (advocates of Soviet-style modernization; critics of the strategy of "people's war" in the face of Soviet nuclear weapons; critics of the failure to provide air cover in the War To Save Korea), in Baoding the Army was above criticism. Jin was only in a few of these photos and only as one of many persons guarding the enemies on the struggle platform.

There were photographs of a later struggle meeting at Jin's school. Jin appeared in many of these. The Red Mansion had grown as the students turned their attention from revisionist cadres and teachers to fellow students from the Four (and later the Five, Nine and Twenty-Three) Black Categories. In some pictures Jin and his comrades posed grimly with their victims, though in others they looked sad or frightened, and in one they actually seemed

to be laughing. In another a small crowd surrounded an unseen victim that appeared to be squatting on the ground.

Jin noticed that the room had grown cold. He felt ill in every cell of his body, as though his heart were pumping insecticide through his veins. He felt as though all his crimes were tattooed on his face. He turned to Han with a wretched grin.

"You see," he said, glancing quickly at Young Xi, "it's not only our nightmare. If you and I are ghosts, just think how many others there must be."

"True," Han said. He eyed Jin without expression and handed him another stack. "I don't think you've seen these."

Jin felt a twinge of fear. He set them aside and lit a cigarette, as if he were resting between courses. He gulped his beer. His hands were trembling.

The scenes were unfamiliar. Big-character posters hanging from the windows of apartment buildings. Meetings in factory courtyards. A rally in front of the Baoding People's Government building, which was surrounded by soldiers. A group portrait with a steam locomotive. A celebration with strings of firecrackers filling a narrow lane with smoke. Was it New Year's Day 1970? A new edition of Selections? Jin did not see anyone he knew.

"Interesting," Jin said, setting the pictures on the table and sliding his hands under his thighs. "Are these

meetings of the Workers Command? I don't see any struggle sessions."

"Right," Han said. "No struggle sessions."

Next Jin looked at young men and women examining rifles, old Type 53's and captured foreign weapons. They struck martial poses and played at shooting each other. One of the leaders, a long-haired fellow with a cigarette stuck to his lip, demonstrated a bolt action. In another picture he was fixing a spike bayonet to a Type 56 automatic rifle. Han must have taken these when the so-called armed workers were plotting to seize control of the city government. In a startling display of Right-opportunism, the district militia had opened its arsenal to the reactionary gang of anarchists, hooligans, putschists, utopian socialists, petty-bourgeois fanatics and absolute egalitarians, so the city had called on the revolutionary youth and the 38th Army for support. Thus began three years of intermittent warfare in which the Army and the district militia, too prudent to commit their own forces but fearful of the "counterrevolutionary" label, supplied and encouraged their young allies.

Jin tasted bitter dread in his mouth as he shuffled through pictures of young men and women guarding factory gates, playing cards on the floor or squatting to eat their meals. He saw them peering from bullet-riddled buildings, setting up home-made mortars, dressing wounds.

“I don’t recognize anyone,” Jin said, sliding the photographs to Han. “You’re not in any of them.”

“Someone has to hold the camera,” Han said. His voice was flat. His eyes were as dull as worn coins. Jin frowned and nodded. He still felt oppressed in his chest, strangled with grief, but he also felt a glimmer of relief. He had not seen himself or any of the Five Revolutionary Comrades in this last batch. And there were no photos at all of the early raids or of the executions that followed the Army’s restoration of order. Han had gone into hiding to escape the Army’s wide-sweeping scythe. Jin looked around for his stick. Young Han handed it to him.

“Good,” Jin said. He stood and pulled on his overcoat, pausing as a wavelet of dizziness licked at his brain. “Good,” he said again as he fastened his buttons. “As you say, Old Han, it was long ago. Another life. But you are Baoding’s historian. You should not destroy these photographs.” He glanced at Young Xi and Young Han, who nodded tentatively.

“Maybe I should donate them to the Army archive,” Han said.

“I don’t think so,” Jin grinned wryly. “The Army has its own photographers.”

“No doubt,” Han said. “It was a great achievement. The Army won victory where everyone else failed. The warlords failed. The dwarf pirates failed. The

Nationalists failed. The so-called United Nations failed and the Soviet imperialists failed. But our Liberation Army did not fail. It was the only army in this century to conquer the revolutionary people. But don't listen to me. I'm talking stupid nonsense, I know."

Jin shook his head, regretful at having awakened old grievances. He said good-bye to the children and started limping down the corridor. Han followed him down the dark stairway.

"Old Jin," Han said as they stood on the porch outside the building, "when do you return to the station?"

"I don't know," Jin said, gripping the curved handle of his stick. "When my doctor permits. I'm afraid I'm still suspended. Have you heard anything?"

"The leaders questioned me about you," Han said. "Old Sui and Comrade Shi. Whether you had contacts with students or other activists. I said I didn't think so. I said I often worked with you and never heard you say anything in favor of the demonstrations or democracy. Only economic reform. Which is true."

Han's face was in shadow but Jin could feel his eyes boring into him. He believed what Han said. Han would say no more than what was true, no matter how long they questioned him.

"It is true," Jin said. "Thank you. No one has asked me about you." He squeezed Han's shoulder and grinned. He

turned to go and raised his eyes heavenwards. The sky was thick with spinning stars and the streetlight at the corner was a fat, vibrant star towards which he would direct his painful steps. He felt as though he were walking on boiling water as he tapped along the invisible driveway, but he managed to reach the gate without falling.

"Old Jin!" he heard Han cry. "Old Jin!" The cry reached his ears like a voice from a well. He halted and turned, leaning on his stick. Old Han, he thought, you're shouting into the empty night like a drunkard.

"Old Jin!" Han cried again. "Are we afraid to die?"

"No!" Jin cried. "Have you forgotten? 'Men die every day!' 'Your death can be as light as a feather, or as weighty as Mount Tai!'" His disembodied voice echoed thinly from the walls.

"Right," Han cried. "I forgot! Old Jin, are we only ghosts?"

"Only ghosts!" Jin cried. Quick tears stung his eyes.

A whistle sounded from the train yard. Jin started down the street that would take him to Five Four Road. The effects of the beer wore off before he was halfway to the tracks. There were no cyclists or pedestrians abroad. As he hobbled and froze, rested and froze, under the long chains of streetlights, he felt as though his heart had been scooped from his chest. Scooped from his chest with a shovel and thrown to the pigs. Yes. He still had much to

learn about being dead. With a pang where his heart had been he suddenly missed Young Zhu. He missed Young Xing. He even missed Old Han. He smiled through stinging tears at the pink streetlights, sole witnesses to these vestigial human feelings. What was he but an amputee who stretches his ghost leg under the bedclothes? He limped home on feet ignited by subterranean fires.

Jin was watching television when the porter's daughter knocked on the door to call him downstairs to the telephone. He deputed Young Xing to take a message. The boy returned bright-eyed and flushed.

"Granddad says to tell you and Ma to come to West Horse Pool tomorrow for dinner," Xingxing said breathlessly. "And to bring me too. He says it's important."

Jin was glad to see his son smiling. He knew he had disappointed him lately, being unable to play outside or even to pursue philately with him. He turned to Young Zhu, who was standing at the window with a dust rag in her hand. She gazed at him with a worn smile.

"Congratulations, Old Jin," she said. "I wish you success."

"Thanks," Jin said. "It must be good news. Looks like my doctor, whoever he is, has decided I can go back to work."

They arrived in the early afternoon to find the commander sitting with Uncle Tang. Tang kept his seat on the sofa but greeted Jin with a benevolent smile, extending both enormous brown hands. The sunlight pouring through the window made a halo of his cropped silver hair. Young Xing ran to Jin's father and put his arms around him, showing an affection Jin had never seen before. Young Zhu took her seat on the sofa at the opposite end from Tang, who now drew Xingxing down beside him. Jin remembered Tang arriving at the house when they were children, sun-baked and huge with a green Western melon under each arm. Jin decided that he and Xingxing would take Uncle Tang some melons as soon as the melons were ripe.

"Commander Tang has some good news for you," Jin's father said, glancing from Jin to Zhu.

"How ridiculous," Tang said, looking down and twiddling Xingxing's ears, "two old soldiers reporting to a young reporter. You tell him, Commander Jin."

The commander nodded. "OK, good, but only because you're no longer a reporter. It's true, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we won't be seeing you much on TV. In fact, son, you probably won't be as famous as before. Fewer children will greet you on the street and fewer women will write you

love-letters. Excuse me, daughter-in-law. It doesn't matter. Son, the city Party committee has appointed you director of Baoding TV."

Tang and the commander eyed Jin expectantly. Jin did not want to disappoint them, but Zhu spoke first.

"That's good, father-in-law. As soon as you called we guessed this had happened. Isn't that right, Old Jin? We warmly, deeply thank you for your efforts to help our family." She glanced at Jin and dropped her eyes, receding again into the sofa.

"It doesn't matter," Tang said, modestly waving his hand. The commander also waved away her thanks.

"How's your health?" Tang asked.

"As Comrade Deng says, 'I feel as fresh as a fish,'" Jin said cheerfully. "Fearing neither hardship nor death."

"That's good," Tang said with satisfaction. "Good, but I have something for you. From the city committee."

Jin laughed as soon as he saw the silk-covered box Tang drew from his pocket. Baoding Iron Balls. Jin unloosed the bone fasteners. It was the new deluxe edition, chrome plated, with a dragon etched in one and a phoenix in the other. Jin handed them to Young Zhu, who shook them and made them ring before replacing them in the box.

"I warmly thank you, Uncle Tang," Jin said. "I hope manipulating these will keep me as young and strong as you."

"Do you still need the stick?" Commander Jin asked.

Jin raised the stick and parried left and right. "Only for self-defense," he laughed. Xingxing and Zhu laughed too. Jin faced Tang. "I seem to have hit my head," he explained, glancing at his father. "At first I felt some dizziness when I walked."

Tang turned to the commander. "There's something I'd like to ask about the injury," he said.

The commander suggested that Zhu and Xingxing visit Xingxing's grandmother in the kitchen. Tang studied Jin thoughtfully and Jin felt the blood rise to his cheeks. If I were alive, he thought, how grateful I would be for all his efforts!

"Young Jin," Tang began, glancing at Jin's father, "is it true you don't remember what happened at the Middle South Sea compound?"

"It's true," Jin said. He peered steadily into Tang's moist tobacco-colored eyes. In the back of his mind, a green pig stirred with twisted yellow tusks and a burning thatch of bristles on its head.

"OK, good. What were you doing? Did you try to prevent the assault? It's possible you were bludgeoned by one of the rioters."

"To tell the truth, I don't remember any riot or assault," Jin said. "I must have fallen before that happened, if that's what happened."

The commander spoke. "So it's possible you were struck by one of the rioters?"

"Maybe so, by accident," Jin said, "but I don't remember that. It's just as likely I hurled myself on the soldiers who threw me to the ground in self-defense."

"I understand," Tang said with a smile, "but there's no evidence of that."

"Take your time, son," the commander said, "the investigation is closed. We just wanted to see if you remembered any more about the incident. We know you signed the petition to criticize reprisals against reporters. That's understandable. I don't need to tell you, we're responsible for you. But we have complete confidence," he added quickly, "we won't be spying on you. We trust your judgment as a patriot and Party member."

Uncle Tang rose to leave, blocking the light from the window like the moon passing across the sun. Jin also rose. A dizziness swirled in his brain but he left his stick by the chair and followed Uncle Tang to the door. Tang turned to say good-bye.

"'With you in control,'" he laughed, "'my mind is at ease.'" Jin laughed and fumblingly seized Tang's hands.

Back inside, Jin could contain himself no longer. “You have a new television!” he exclaimed to his father.

“That’s right,” the commander said. “Want to see how it works?”

Xingxing ran in from the kitchen.

“I know how it works,” he said.

The screen flashed. A basketball game was in progress. The red and blue outfits of the players flashed like rubies and sapphires. Xingxing gazed as if hypnotized.

“Doing some writing?” Jin asked, nodding at his father’s ink-stained hands.

“Nothing interesting,” his father said rising, “but I’d like to show you a scroll that just came from Changchun.”

Jin smiled to acknowledge his father’s devotion to the brush. He wobbled after him, keeping one hand on the wall as he climbed the stairs.

Using a wooden pole with a metal hook on one end, the commander hung a scroll from a nail. The silk border was frayed and the paper was silvery with age. A sense of foreboding stabbed at Jin’s breast as he admired the gracious muscular characters.

“An old friend sent it,” the commander said.

"From Changchun," Jin repeated vaguely. "It's very well written." His anxiety mounted. Something was slipping out of his hands.

"The writer was Japanese," his father was saying, "a scholar who came to Manchuria during the warlord period."

"It looks ——" Jin's face grew hot. It was incredible, but he seemed to recognize the scroll. Years ago, on setting out with his Revolutionary comrades to establish Revolutionary ties with other Red Guard units, he had taken the scroll —— stolen it —— along with a few others from his father's collection. Vile Confucian trash, they called the scrolls, without laying any blame on the commander, a distinguished officer in an army close to Lin Biao. They had sold them along the way —— in Shenyang, Jin believed —— for food and drink. In the turmoil that followed he had completely forgotten the stolen scrolls. As he looked at his father, an aging, obscure man absorbed in his hobby, Jin thought of emigrating. He could settle in Malaysia or America. Of the thirty-six strategies, the best is running away.

"A great shame," Jin rasped. He stared at the floor. Poisonous tears stung his eyes. "I had forgotten. Please excuse me."

"No, excuse me," his father rejoined energetically, his face darkening with embarrassment. "I too had forgotten. My point was not to remind you of the past.

That was twenty years ago, another life. We were all different then. At least you didn't burn it, you and the First Emperor's good little soldiers. Well, we lost more than a few scrolls. And this one's come back. Again, excuse me. Just look at the writing. It's from Guo Xiang's commentary on Zhuang Zi. 'Like a loose boat adrift, veering neither east nor west.'"

The commander peered at the scroll, his eyes traveling up and down, a fixed smile on his lips.

"How did you find it?" Jin asked.

"By not looking," the commander said seriously, his eyes on the paper. "An old friend found it. In the collection of a commissar in Changchun. When he died, the whole collection was sold. My friend belongs to the Jilin Province Calligraphy Research Society."

"Again, I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. I'm happy to see it again, but not as happy as I am to see you and Young Xing. Aiya. What a useful saying that is, 'veering neither east nor west.' That Japanese scholar arrived on a tidal wave of misfortune for the Chinese people, but he loved our Chinese writing." The commander paused. "He wrote this," he added softly.

Jin nodded. The commander unhooked the scroll and deftly rolled it up between his hands. He took another

from the glass-windowed bookcase and hung it on the hook. It too was old, but Jin recognized the style.

"Wind blows, grass bends," Jin said. "Not bad." He tried to concentrate on the writing. The tossing curves and lines made him feel ill. Most of the characters were illegible but the movements of the brush, recorded by a stranger long ago, wrung his breast. He closed his eyes as the stranger's pain passed through him. No, he thought. Go away.

His father scanned the piece appraisingly. "The writer was Chinese, but the words come from a Japanese poet. Do you like it?" The commander drew a breath then solemnly intoned: "'O courier from the world below, bear him gently on your back!'"

Jin picked out a few more characters as a pang of sorrow throbbed in his throat. Tears collected in his eyes. How strange that a man's soul could flow through his arm and live on paper forever —— as though a ghost could speak about his sorrow. Jin looked at his father, who impassively studied the varied characters. Now that he could follow his heart's desire, maybe he too wanted to imitate the leopard, which leaves a spotted pelt behind when it dies.

"When we invented this style," Jin said sharply, as his father rolled up the scroll, "the little pirates were still living in trees."

The commander knelt at the bookcase to replace the scroll.

"Okura wrote the poem for his son," he said. "Commander Du selected those lines when his own son died of fever. He had already buried his wife and daughter."

"What's this?" Jin asked, turning to the writing table. "I can barely read a word of it. It's drunken grass, right?"

"Right."

The odd streaks and knots obeyed no consistency or proportion. The gist of the sentence seemed to be that the writer had no need to ask for praise.

"Is this also a poem from feudal times?" Jin asked.

"No, these are my own words," the commander said. He looked down at his work. Jin studied the characters. As he watched, the black stumbling lines, here swollen, there attenuated, and the black jagged curls from which they sprang seemed to hum with contentment on the white field.

"'East or west, the cart will find its way' —— is that right?"

"Do you like it?" The commander's eyes were shining. Jin looked down at the characters and nodded.

"Very much," he said. "It follows the tradition but you can also sense the writer's own personality. It's very good."

"It's yours," the commander said.

"No, please."

"Yes, it would make me happy if you took it."

"No, you should give it to a friend, someone who can really appreciate it."

"You don't appreciate it?"

"Very much," Jin said. "I like it very much. I'll have it mounted. On silk."

"Good," the commander said, carefully rolling the long sheet, "very good. The scroll you took, it was twenty years before it returned. I don't think I'll be here in twenty years, so I'm giving you this one now. Please." Bowing his iron-gray head, he proffered the rolled paper to Jin.

Jin took the scroll. "Good. Thank you. I need this. I think you write very well."

The sun was disappearing among the tips of the cedars at People's Park. Jin walked beside Young Zhu and ahead of Old Ba and Xingxing tapping the sidewalk at each step. A steady murmur filled the chilly air, broken only by occasional childish cries. Ten thousand shoes scuffed the walks and the bare earth, raising a fine dust that hung in the air. It was the time of the Pure Light Festival, the day of sweeping graves. The temperature was well above freezing, as it had been most of the day, and tiny buds

were visible on the shrubberies. Soon longer days would rout the Siberian nights, fuzzy leaves would blanket the limbs of trees and the dry fields would teem with shoots of corn, tomato and cabbage.

Jin stopped to watch Xingxing flit into the shadow of a stand of cypress. The boy stood motionless and nearly invisible among the somber boughs. Jin felt a twinge of fear, as though his son too were a ghost. At a word from Zhu, however, Xingxing slowly rematerialized, then returned and took Jin's hand. The crowd around them flowed in all directions, west towards the Taihang Mountains, east towards the amusement park, south towards the snakes and birds and north towards Jin's old comrades, the monkeys and bears.

Jin had just finished his first week as director of Baoding TV. Early that morning, to the puzzlement of a pair of young technicians, he had swept the doorstep of the newspaper building, pulled a Guangdong orange from his pocket and set it on the step. He stepped back and bowed three times. Now as he walked beside Young Zhu, he imagined informal discussions among city cadres, a technician inn a lab coat dissecting a wizened orange, a criticism meeting with the shrunken, stitched-up orange placed in evidence. Aiya! Apparently he was still afraid of his comrades. He glanced at Zhu. If she felt any regret at having married a ghost, she kept it to herself.

Which was no surprise. Marriages between ghosts and human beings were not uncommon in Baoding. Zhu asked whether Comrade Shi was cooperating with him.

"She's the Chairman's good little soldier," Jin said. "She's happy to devote herself to her duties as branch secretary." He squeezed Zhu's hand. Devote herself, indeed! He saw Young Shi on her knees among rumpled sheets, shirt unbuttoned, tears of joy squeezed from her bulging eyes. Old Sui's cap pulled low. Clever hare digs three burrows. Would she be so devoted to her new director? Jin's stick skipped a tap. Fortunately there was Young Song.

"Want to hear something funny?" he said, looking around to see where Xingxing was. "Comrade Shi and Young Song. In the Culture Section. You should see their 'peaceful competition' at meetings."

"He's very young," Zhu said skeptically. "Is she divorced?"

"No. But ever since Song put on that Army tunic —— and that old badge ——" Jin shivered as the raw wind lifted his hair. He glanced at Zhu and again he squeezed her hand.

"You're not afraid Old Sui will try to influence her?" Zhu asked.

Jin shook his head and pinched a pressure point on her hand.

"No. Even if the affair continued, she would adhere to the rules of criticism and self-criticism and unity-criticism-unity. She respects Party discipline. I'm more worried that her 'commandist' work-style will make her the nucleus of an anti-Jin faction. I plan to consult everyone about his responsibilities. That's my 'open policy.' People won't have to conspire to achieve their ambitions."

The cold dry air made Jin thirsty. Where three sidewalks converged he stepped up to a homely young woman selling candied haws and soft drinks from a sky-blue cart. He purchased four bottles of Heijiu Cola and distributed them to his family. He threw back his head and in a dizzying half-minute chugged down the entire contents of the bottle, the brown liquid dripping from his chin. It's isotonic, if you know what that means.

"I thought you didn't like Heijiu Cola," Zhu said.

"Mm," Jin said, wiping his lips and chin with a handkerchief. "Not bad. It tastes like plum juice. No, if it can help our Olympic team, maybe it can bring an old ghost back to life."

Holding hands with Xingxing, Jin felt as lively as a Northeastern tiger. He steered his family towards the hill, the highest point in Baoding, that had once been fortified by the Japanese. On both sides of the walk, young men and women ascended and descended through the brush and dry grass that was littered with styrofoam trays

and paper cups. Jin looked up the path at the dark shapes mounting into sky. A miniature pilgrimage to Mount Tai. The dead were coming from the Six Directions to receive their rewards and punishments from King Yan.

"Han Lixin declined," Jin said to Young Zhu over his shoulder. "He suggested Young Rui as assistant director. She's not too friendly, so no one will say I'm favoring her. She's not too old, so she doesn't bear a grudge against former activists. She's not too bright, so she won't see through my plans. And she's not too gifted, so the station won't lose a good journalist when she's promoted."

"The Four Not Too's," Old Ba said. "He's not too dumb, your friend."

"What are your plans?" Zhu asked.

They reached the open space on the crown of the hill. Xingxing ran off to play on the old artillery platform, while Jin, Zhu and Ba joined the family groups that gazed down on the ancient city from the edge of the bluff. Although the shrubs that rimmed the summit were still mere bundles of sticks, girls posed before them with burgeoning twigs held lightly between their fingers while their boyfriends clicked their clumsy leather-bound cameras. Shot in the weakening afternoon light, the pictures would be as indistinct as dreams. About ten meters away, Jin caught sight of Young Tun and her mother. Tun was wearing

a light blue high-collared surcoat over a quilted jacket. Jin found the collar and cloth buttons oddly moving, as if Tun were returning to the ways of a peasant grandmother.

Jin surveyed the city. On the day he learned of his promotion, he had walked with his father after dinner to Middle Horse Pool. As the sun sank to the western horizon, his father lamented the fate of the Marshal Lin, whose fall had wrecked the careers of many high officers, and of many not so high. As commander of the 38th Army's logistics division, Commander Jin had been asked to supply weapons and equipment, including Red Flag and Red Arrow rockets and supporting radar and fire control systems, to Lin Liguo, the Marshal's son, for "testing." Young Lin, already a general in the air force, had assembled a corps of elite warriors which he called the "Joint Fleet" on a large estate in Shanghai. His aide-de-camp was an air force officer named Yu Xinye.

"During one of my visits to Shanghai," the commander said, "Yu told me that Comrade Ye Qun, Young Lin's mother" (and the fatherland's foremost collector of Revolutionary badges, Jin noted to himself), "had charged him with finding Young Lin a wife. Joint Fleet officers reviewed thousands of dossiers submitted by the Ministry of Defense and thousands of photographs of officers' daughters. Hundreds of young women traveled to Shanghai for 'testing' — just like my rockets. Yu and his comrades finally put an

end to the revolting orgy by igniting Young Lin's military ambition. Hence his appetite for advanced weapons."

The commander now believed that Young Lin and his "Fleet" were plotting to attack the Chairman's train. Their goal: to confer supreme power on the Chairman's "most brilliant pupil and chosen successor," who would end the Cultural Revolution, reknit China's historic ties with the Soviets, and erect the eastern hemisphere into a "terrifying citadel of Communism." The commander's voice was grim as he made this confession and his face looked gray in the twilight. He had almost assassinated the Chairman. And he had inadvertently brought about the deaths of Marshal Lin and his son, whom the Chairman had assassinated when he learned of the Joint Fleet's plans.

After the bodies were "recovered" in Outer Mongolia, the commander underwent several days of questioning. Fortunately he knew nothing of Young Lin's scheme and no one asked him about the Joint Fleet's search for a wife. But he had always believed that Young Lin's failure had resulted from excessive use of women, which had weakened his mind and induced him to take stupid risks. "He imagined he was another God of War," the commander said gravely.

Jin had nodded gravely. The honest old soldier, he said to himself, handing down his wisdom to his son. To his son the twenty times dead. To his son the "Left"-

adventurist, the rank closed-doorist, the factionalist fighter. To his son the urinating ghost, whose heart had been devoured by pigs. Yes, my son, beware of women. Truly, as the Chairman said, “Strange things can happen in this world.”

At the time Jin thought that his father was trying to explain why he had contacted the security bureau about Xiang. Which he had done at Zhu’s request. But there was no need to explain. After fifteen years, Xiang belonged in Shanxi. Now it seemed to Jin saw that the commander had had something else in mind. Not only had he almost murdered the Chairman. And contributed to the Invincible Marshal’s doom. Not only had he been stripped of his duties to spend the crowning years of his career in a comfortable but useless imprisonment. To his lasting regret and shame, he had failed to preserve his son from the Terror.

Jin saw that Zhu was gazing up at him. “Oh, sorry,” he said, “my plans. Right. Blindfold heaven and cross the sea. Raise a cry in the west, attack the east. Be reborn in a corpse. Serve the people heart and soul by giving free rein to our talented reporters, actors and technicians. Song suggested letting people advertise for wives and husbands. We could film them working or talking with friends or playing games. He thinks people would like more foreign programs. We could earn foreign exchange by

inviting foreigners to advertise. I've asked him to write a show about Army doctors." Jin could not speak of Young Song's "secret weapon" in public. Maybe produce it as an animated series. "The Big Red Balloon." The little pilot's travels around China.

Jin followed Young Zhu's gaze to the stadium, the train station, the Horse Market, the Lotus Pool Academy and the Pavilion of Great Mercy, which was still encased in a bamboo cage of scaffolding. It was scheduled to reopen in six weeks. Jin planned to broadcast the ceremony. He thought of Kang Youwei, who admired Baoding from an airplane before Liberation, comparing its pavilions and houses to bowls and bottles on a tray.

"Yin suggests I go on the air to talk about my opinions," Jin said. "As station directors do in foreign countries. Maybe he just wants to look better by comparison. But it's an idea. Jin Wuming Thought. Selections From. Why not? Comrade Deng has a Thought. The Chairman has a Thought. Everyone has a Thought. I can say whatever I like, right? What can they do to a ghost?"

Zhu pursed her lips and looked away through the dimming air. Beyond the ancient city, the towers and smokestacks of the Western Suburbs wrote their crooked signatures on the bank of haze that blurred the Taihang Mountains. The sinking sun glowed over Shanxi province like the spotted red egg of primordial chaos. Jin raised

his rattan stick and waggled it in the direction of the press compound, then turned and looked across the plateau in the direction of Shijiazhuang. The waning Jade Hare had sunk unmourned at noon and the southern sky, in contrast to the yellow-brown west, was a darkening curtain of Tibetan blue. A lone jet fighter, an ancient Jian 4 modeled on a Soviet original, flashed as it caught the descending sun.

"Young Song wants to make a horror show," Jin said. "They're very popular abroad."

"Movies from India are also good," Zhu said, staring down at the city.

"Everyone liked that Mexican program," Old Ba said.

Jin put his hand on Zhu's back. "If you want Indian and Mexican movies, you'll have Indian and Mexican movies. And of course, I'll have the city authorities put us on the list for a new apartment. When a man finds the way, even his pigs and monkeys go to heaven."

"Ei," Zhu laughed, "who are you calling pigs and monkeys?"

Jin laughed. Tears trickled down his wife's red cheeks like rainwater running down a wall. He felt tears sting his own eyes. He seized Zhu's hand and squeezed it until she smiled at him, then let it fall. He wiped his eyes and looked away. All across the city, on thousands of gray roofs, aerials stood like skeletal trees awaiting his transmissions. He rotated from north to west to south,

where the Jian 4 burned in the distance like a star. Veering to catch the sun’s last beams, it flared and vanished in a burst of gold.