

## RIDING THE HORSE

Tom Bradley

HONG MA HAN, the formidable Red Horseman, was living almost exactly as he had as a junior middle school student before the mobilization. But Bu Yu immediately noticed some important differences.

Today it was Hong Ma Han who occupied the sitting room, while his parents stayed mostly in the tiny side room. And today thick black curtains hung over the windows to prevent the bright, unsmoky sunshine, the immemorial boast of this mountain town, from obscuring the picture on Hong Ma Han's brand new television set.

The last time Bu Yu had ridden through on a linkup, televisions, even black and white ones, and certainly color Japanese imports like this, were unheard of. But now nearby Black Flower Mountain boasted a new silver skeleton of a pagoda that brought education to Hong Ma Han. He was one of a totally new breed of Chinese: a television university student.

It was said that Daoist clergy and monastics in the hills had taken to worshipping that relay tower, and it didn't exactly represent a benevolent god to them.

Another difference in the Red Horseman's life was the large carton of expensive western-style toilet paper, perfumed, and rolled instead of folded, that came close to vying with the television as the focus of attention in this small apartment.

"What's all the pink paper for?"

Hong Ma Han mumbled something elusive about getting it at a discount from his father's dan wei, and let it pass.

Bu Yu's former comrade-in-arms obviously never set foot outdoors any longer. He was almost as colorless as the pink-eyed "false foreigners" one used to see in freak shows in the late fifties, before the provincial governor read some contraband books, became influenced by western humanistic ideals and decided that albinos should be gainfully employed in photographic film factories. Hong Ma Han, once a mighty warrior, seemed afraid now of going out. But, oddly, he also seemed happy—too happy, in fact. He giggled at the slightest provocation.

"My father's unit is paying for all of this," he said. "I

have some good guanxi now. If I stay home and don't flunk the mail-order test, I'll be the first person from this town to get an academic certificate since Shui Shui Bo the bandit sat for the imperial examinations disguised as a bourgeois landlord."

Hong Ma Han embraced himself and giggled—unnaturally, it seemed to Bu Yu.

"And how soon will you graduate?"

More than seven years Hong Ma Han had reputedly lingered in front of the screen, yet it seemed as though that question had never occurred to him. His face went limp a few seconds, his eyes dead, like someone with slight epilepsy. He sucked his lips gently, like a baby, and seemed only half-conscious for a couple of seconds.

His mother brought in something made almost entirely of sugar and grease, apparently as a snack. No hot meal had produced itself yet.

"You have a good mother," said Bu Yu.

"She's nothing compared to yours," whispered Hong Ma Han, looking furtively over the back of his armchair. He seemed about to continue on the same subject, but glanced at Bu Yu and, with an audible gasp, stopped talking. Bu Yu must've sunken his fingernails into his forehead in torment, for the Red Horseman shied off and steered the conversation away from mothers.

"Tell me more about your brother. Why is he going to a university so obscure, and so full of counterrevolutionaries and democracy demonstrators?"

"You know the answer to that question," said Bu Yu.

In his urgency to explain Younger Brother's inexplicable life, Bu Yu didn't fully register the mention of student demonstrators, except as a vague thrill in his stomach. It was the first he'd heard of this. But they demonstrated in the name of democracy, not something better and more real. So perhaps they weren't worth notice.

"You know the answer," repeated Bu Yu, and he began working his hands in the air, groping for words among the rotten memories.

In an attempt to create an incident that would at-

tract the attention of the central authorities, Bu Yu's united-faction brigade had gotten carried away in "dragging out" and struggling the wife of the provincial foreign affairs minister. This reactionary politician had immediately afterwards gotten himself transferred to America, far enough away to avoid further patriotic scrutiny by the Red Guards, so he'd been able to remain in power after the smoke cleared. The result was that each member of Bu Yu's brigade had been hounded and persecuted without mercy for the past ten years, except for the ones with powerful fathers. Bu Yu's father, as a pile of ashes in an urn on the side of a mountain, had little power to spare.

Bu Yu had been internally exiled. But, since the family line would have died out with him, the widowed minister had mercifully allowed Younger Brother, only a child at the time Madame Minister was fatally violated with the adze blade, to return to town after just a few years under the Shifu's charge. But, of course, only the worst university in the province seemed to have a slot for him.

"A sad story," said Hong Ma Han, whose brigade had stayed safe in this town during that period, willing prisoners of mothers who wouldn't allow their children the glory of pulling down the highest provincial officials.

"And this elephant-sized foreign specialist," continued Hong Ma Han after the appropriate moment of silence, "the only one who would teach in such a piss-pot because I'm sure he's a criminal or derelict—you say he persecutes Xiao Bu?"

"Mosquito Lunch he calls him. In my commune—er, not mine, but—"

Hong Ma Han terrifiedly giggled something about being assimilated into the peasant stratum. Bu Yu spoke louder.

"—they still hold firm the memory of Mao's little red dragons at Pao An who aided so resolutely in the struggle against—"

Trying to help, Hong Ma Han finished the sentence with gibberish, as if to say, "Yes, yes, please go on."

"Mao's men didn't call their youth insect names," said Bu Yu. "They said Comrade to one another, and meant it."

"Yes, I suppose they did, didn't they?" said Hong Ma Han, obviously thinking of something else. He eyed his watch. "Say, when you leave here, I know a place you can go where you might find help. You can drop in on the Black Flower Temple, near the relay tower, in fact. Before the CCTV construction team cut the road up there, that temple was considered quite remote.

Too remote for our little generals to bother sacking it during the Four Olds campaign. So I assume they're still in operation. And that's lucky for you, because you must cross Black Flower Mountain eventually, mustn't you?"

When Bu Yu didn't jump right up and start climbing cliffs, Hong Ma Han looked at his watch again, and decided to try to tantalize his guest further.

"Do you know any card or coin tricks? Or maybe something with stick matches? Do something like that for the nuns and they'll kowtow to you as the latest reincarnation of the Buddha and let you eat the boiled breasts of their white chickens. At night you can sleep on the altar and gorge on the jungle people's fruit offerings, if you can manage to gag down the incense ash they're covered with. The nuns will greet the day thinking the Black Flower Mountain spirits have eaten well, and they'll praise you, pray to you and feed you more chicken because your presence is appetizing to the local ghosts."

During all this talk about food, Hong Ma Han kept rubbing his belly and licking his cheeks and the base of his nose. Bu Yu didn't remember his tongue being this long. Then the smile left his face and he got serious.

"But you'll have to clear out in a couple days or so, because the last time somebody tried this—a purged member of our outfit, as a matter of fact, who got lost in the dark and had to sleep outside a few nights—the mother superior sent a fleet-footed messenger to the party secretary at Zhengxin. She's always held out the hope of converting him and, through him, I suppose, the party apparatus of the whole county. And what better way than to introduce him to the magic sleight-of-hand Buddha himself? And, of course, the secretary sent up a couple militiamen to arrest the boy for fraud. Nobody's seen him since."

Hong Ma Han's voice trailed off as he realized that last anecdote might be a little discouraging. He picked up his line of thought at an earlier point.

"Before you go down off the mountain, you can lift one of the tape recorders the nuns conduct funeral services with, automatic praying machines to preserve their devout throats for swallowing the bereaved family's food and wine. They're cheap domestic goods, nothing Japanese yet—unless the nuns've been experiencing a boom in business with the open-door policy. But they'll bring you a few kuai in town among the suburbanite peasant classes."

The Red Horseman glanced back to make sure his mother wasn't in the room, then leaned forward and

whispered, "I've been told there's this one simple-minded novice-type nun whose delicate meat you can enter—"

When Bu Yu reacted with open shock and disgust, Hong Ma Han retreated and said, "Yes, it is terrible, isn't it? But you always were a reformist in that respect, too."

"And more than one boy in your contingent had a terrible reputation."

Inevitably, they'd begun reopening old factional wounds. The situation was now even more hopeless than before. Bu Yu was ready to weep like a girl with fatigue and loneliness and disappointment.

The Red Horseman seemed to sense the crisis. "So, what did you expect from me?" he asked in a quieter voice. He gazed at Bu Yu's bare, bleeding feet, at the cuts and bruises that only served to stoke Bu Yu's revolutionary ardor. It wouldn't be as easy to get rid of him as Hong Ma Han supposed.

"Come with me and help," said Bu Yu.

"I must stay here and study," he murmured, not even convincing himself. "Deng Xiaoping has urged us to be both red and expert."

"But you are—we called you the Red Horseman. The mighty Hong Ma Han. Don't you remember? All by yourself you conducted reconnaissance work for the Putian incident when our detachments were locked up bleeding in the P.L.A. stockade."

"Exactly. Do you realize how close I came to being killed?"

"Yes? Well? All of us, several times, came close to—"

"Don't you understand?" Hong Ma Han raked the air over his viscera with his fingernails. He peered past the edge of the television into the black corners of his parents' apartment. "I was all by myself that night. Do you know what I mean? Alone."

For a full minute, Bu Yu stared wordlessly at this lone Chinaman.

"Please don't have contempt for me," whispered Hong Ma Han.

"I don't think I do. Really, I don't think so."

The Red Horseman looked back into the glowing colors of the screen for a moment, absorbed, mustering his emotional forces.

"I have an idea," he said. "Stop me if you think I'm being reactionary or something."

He went to a chest of drawers and got out his old arm band and Mao quotations. He handed Bu Yu something to place over the heart inside his breast: one of the red lapel pins which airplane factories used

to produce instead of airplanes back in the sixties. He embarrassed Bu Yu further by dragging out an old ragged portrait of the Great Helmsman. Just as Bu Yu hoped he wouldn't do, he began to chant and sway: it was the loyalty dance that Bu Yu thought he'd never see again in China. This was preparatory to the random opening of the Little Red Book, to receive words to live by, the day's directive.

Hong Ma Han looked, and read solemnly: "Quit your farting."

He squealed, giggled, hugged himself, seemingly transported; but all the while he was examining the dial of his watch through the tears of forced mirth that slid like temple balm down his rice-colored cheeks.

"You'll have to excuse me, Comrade, ah, Bu. It's time for my French class. The teacher is excellent, merci beaucoup, a lovely overseas Chinese girl."

He turned the television up, then ushered Bu Yu out into the concrete stairwell in a splash of rats.

Before the door closed Hong Ma Han could be seen unrolling whole meters of scented pink tissue onto his left hand and settling himself into the overstuffed chair he'd liberated from his father.

The Red Horseman's mother tiptoed quickly to pull the black drapes more tightly shut.