The Blank Stele

Translated by Robert Joe Cutter

There is a small stream in front of the village, not wide, its shallow current pellucid, as transparent as glass. Iridescent pebbles on its bed and still others borne along by the water can all be seen clearly, along with the inverted watery reflections of winging woodland birds. Going to work in the fields, to town to sell firewood, or to school, the villagers waded across barefoot in summer and tiptoed from rock to rock in winter. Thus, it both was and wasn’t convenient. Everyone had been saying for years that we ought to build a bridge, but in all those years it had never been built. After all, hundreds of generations had lived here without a bridge, which proved that we could keep on getting by without one. Why make more trouble and misery for yourself? When you can take it easy instead, why be your own worst enemy?

Across the small stream was a grave mound, a large one as big as a small hill. How long had it been there? Nobody knew. There was a ginkgo tree on top, and the old-timers claimed the tree was over a thousand years old. That could be, for the shade covered more than an acre of ground. A stele stood in front of the grave. It was tall and thick and topped with a dragon-carved capital. A thousand years of wind and rain had worn away the words. What was written on it? Nobody could tell. No one went to look at it, and no one wanted to. With life so complicated and endlessly tangled, and when one could scarcely take care of oneself, who gave a damn about the doings of a stiff? What’d be the point of being able to read it anyway? Could we eat it, or drink it, or make revolution with it?

Later on there was a spell of revolution. At first, we attacked the living group by group. Of the forty-five households in the village, forty-two got attacked. The more numerous the attacks, the more everyone got into at-
tacking people. To score some points and atone for their crimes, those attacked one day would go to great lengths to attack others the next. Those who were to be attacked tomorrow would go to great lengths to get out of it by attacking others. You attack me, I attack you. Though being attacked was by no means pleasant, every cloud has its silver lining. When someone was attacked, everyone would sit around watching the excitement—taking a little break was sure easier than trying to copy the Dazhai model production brigade. This attacking one for the good of all fit perfectly with revolutionary principles. But once the living had all been soundly attacked several times over, and there was no one left to attack, we had to go back to working our butts off. That was no fun at all. What’s more, the higher-ups wouldn’t let us drop our revolutionary activities. What were we to do? What was left to attack? Right! The time had come for the grave mound. Yeah! Whoever was in there was definitely a real somebody, not just some decent guy. He was definitely a high official, a capitalist raider. He’d never have had such a big grave mound if he’d just been some twerp, some decent guy, some commoner, some revolutionary. When the authorities heard the news, they issued a commendation: Good! Excellent! The thrust is excellent, and you should attack him hard and sock it to him good!!

So, everyone noisily pitched in.
Down with the big tree!
Dig up the grave!
Knock down the stele!

Tramp on him a million times over! No matter how many millennia he’s already been dead, don’t let him get free. Then we took the stele and laid it across the small stream.

The revolution was great! It “revolutionized” a bridge right across that ancient stream.

The revolution was great! Commoners got to tramp on the body of a great official from a thousand years past!

From then on, the people of the village no longer had to wade barefoot or hop from rock to rock when they went to work in the fields, to sell firewood, or to school. We all felt quite smug when we crossed that bridge. Take a look and see who’s oppressing whom now. This is for being so evil and heartless and shameless when you were alive. Some of us deliberately stamped our feet hard a few times as we crossed, while others chimed it with their picks, and still others pised on it. Why? To vent our hatred. And for sheer satisfaction. To vent what hatred? Satisfaction at what? No one gave it a thought, and we didn’t need to. Just to be able to knock something down that had been standing and tramp on it and stamp and piss on it to your heart’s desire—this was triumph, this was power, so we vented our hatred and felt gratified, and it was beautiful and we were happy. Why ask why?

It wasn’t that we didn’t think at all. We did, and we thought quite a bit.
Besides, as long as there’s credit to be had, you can bet there’ll be people ready and willing to earn it. If you don’t earn credit, what are you going to earn? So, everyone started informing, and in the end we had our accused.

It had to be he! Filial descendant of the landlord class, traitor to the poor and lower-middle peasants, sworn enemy of the revolution, one of Liu Shaoqi’s little reptiles. When we dug up the grave, everyone joyfully vied and contended in digging it up. Only he acted like he was digging up the graves of his own parents and asked for time off, claiming he had a stomach-ache. He even cried, saying it was because his stomach hurt so much. All of us villagers beamed with joy and felt proud as we went back and forth across that little bridge. Only he continued to wade across the river and did not set foot on the bridge. He even sighed aloud as he watched the happy people. He wouldn’t cross the bridge, and he wouldn’t let his little grandson cross it either. He waded back and forth three times a day to carry him to school. Who was he? Why, Xu Shuge, the old schoolteacher, of course. His beard was all white, and yet here he was, still playing games and as frivolous as ever. There just wasn’t any cure for a jerk as incorrigible as he. His son had been killed in class struggle, his daughter-in-law had remarried into another family, and still he was absolutely unrepentant. What was he up to? What had he done? They picked him up and brought him in. First they had him regurgitate official policy, which he did fluently by reciting, “Leniency toward those who confess their crimes, severity toward those who resist.” But while he said “confess,” he didn’t do so. He sealed his lips and didn’t utter a word. It didn’t matter. It was easy. If the old man wouldn’t confess, there was still the little one.

They picked up Little Wen and brought him in. A shiny cleaver was put to his neck and sawed back and forth. Good, the little reactionary was not as stubborn as the old one after all. He cried. And he talked. Granddad made a rubbing of the little bridge. Why did he do it? He’s up to no good and keeping records of what we’ve done. He figures on seeking a reward from that dead official after he dies and conspiring with the officials of the netherworld to return to the world of the living and settle old scores. How poisoned is his heart! How sinister! How deceitful! If there hadn’t been so many vigilant eyes around, his scheme might have succeeded! We must make him hand over the rubbing. Hand it over! Oh, you won’t? Search for it! We’ve got to find it even if we have to dig down three feet. We emptied his trunks and cabinets—even the rat holes in his house were not spared. There was not a grain of salt in his jar, nor a grain of rice in his pantry. If the old bastard was living on mere wind and saliva and still had the nerve and the money to do something crooked like this, he must really be possessed. Where was it hidden? The interrogators wore out their tongues asking and pounded the table to bits, but the old bastard was unshakable. A reactionary to the end, he simply would not talk!

The whole village was outraged, even the most guileless among them. Shit! Playing games and scaring the hell out of us. Making us kowtow to Heaven for nothing! We can’t let him off lightly. We’ll have to give him a taste of revolution.

So, for three days and nights running we met and took turns assailing the reactionary. We ate and slept and attacked him in shifts. Oh my, it was lively and exciting! There hadn’t been a play in the village for over ten years, and little kids had to ask what a play was like and how much fun it was to watch. But this was more of a play than the real thing, and more fun to watch, too. Besides, you didn’t have to buy a ticket. Take a look. Take a good look. Look until you’ve seen enough. Pushing, squeezing, punching, suspending, forced kneeling—we bullied him every way there was. And we invented a new way—pulling out his beard. We pulled it out a whisker at a time, questioning him after each one and pulling out another when he wouldn’t talk. We kept on pulling them out one by one until the old man turned into an old woman. It was really something to see. Nothing like it in a play.

The old bastard simply wouldn’t talk. Instead of atoning for his crime by doing what was right, he just laughed out loud, laughing himself to tears. Was he insane? Insane, my ass! He was pretending to be insane and idiotic to resist. He thought he could get through the ordeal by deception. But it wasn’t going to be that easy. Guilty of a heinous crime and more Liu Shaoqi than Liu Shaoqi, he was rotten to the core. Rotten? We didn’t care how rotten he was, nor how bullheaded. Water buffaloes are big but there’s still ways to catch ’em. Charge him with something, put him under surveillance, boss him around, assign him the heaviest work, kill him with class struggle, work him to death, annoy him to death, and then see who’s more malicious than whom. Is the revolution easily trifled with? Is it easily deceived? For as long as you’re alive, you’ll be eating the tasty fruits of what you’ve done!

A praying mantis should drop the idea of stopping a great chariot, for it can’t succeed. We went right on using the little revolutionary bridge as before, but when we were on it we had one more thing to laugh about. We laughed at Xu Shuge’s being such a stupid prick. So what if he’d read a bellyful of books? It was all a waste. He’d become a pedant. He’d read himself stupid. He didn’t know where to do his ass-kissing. He rejected the living and would not curry favor among them, instead fawning over a ghost. No matter how important an official the man in the tomb was, he was rotten to the core. Long ago. If he’s not alive and kicking, what’s the use of worrying about him, standing up for him, and protecting him? Can he repay you with so much as a fart to eat? If Xu didn’t even understand this, he didn’t understand anything, and he had drunk all that ink for naught.

Year in and year out we walked across the stone stele, and year in and year out we walked back. We walked back and forth without end. The surface of the bridge was polished smooth by the soles of all of those feet coming and...
going, and then was plastered over with the mud of all of those feet coming and going. The stone stele was no longer a stone stele. It had become an actual little bridge. Once we had walked over it so many times and it had become a habit, had become commonplace, was no longer new, we were no longer interested in the bridge's origin. Gradually it faded from memory. We forgot that the little bridge beneath our feet was a stone stele. We forgot the big grave mound that had originally been behind the stone stele. And we forgot Xi Shuge's beard. We forgot everything about everything, and we no longer laughed. A bridge was a bridge. As long as it was convenient for going back and forth, that's all that mattered. Why recall that it was made of a stone stele? Why recall the big grave mound behind the stone stele? Why recall Xi Shuge's beard? What was the point in remembering these things? If you had nothing to do, a nap could take a load off your mind.

Many years passed, and the events surrounding the little bridge had long since died and been buried. They were completely forgotten.

We just said that what's past is past. Who was to know that those dead events that had been buried away were to be dug up again.

One day a small car suddenly arrived in the village, its black paint gleaming. It was long and squat, just like a dung beetle, and belched smoke from its butt. So the village, which had been peaceful for all these years, was once more thrown into a state of excitement. The men didn't go to the fields, and the women didn't do any cooking. Carrying and dragging their little ones and shouting back and forth, they gathered round to get a look at this rare and novel object, as though they were seeing a three-legged person or a one-legged cow. Piled six deep, they tried to squeeze forward and wound up cussing and swearing, for no one was about to budge for anyone else. Several people climbed out of the belly of the dung beetle. One was elderly, with a head of white hair and wearing glasses. He looked like an important official. The important official first led his military guard to the big grave mound, and when he saw the broken grave, he sighed aloud, as though it had been his family's ancestral grave, as though someone had destroyed his family's geomantic pattern. The military guard excavated the earth about the big grave mound, picked up some potsherds, and packed them in the car. As if they were valuable, as though they'd collected a pile of five-cent pieces. What did they want this stuff for? Antiquities! Ha! Antiquities? City folks get all excited about stuff they haven't seen before. Take the rocks in the river, the dirt in the fields, the little stream in front of the village, the high hill behind it, they've all been here since creation, they're all antiques! If you want to take them all back—us, too, since we're on them—then great! We couldn't help laughing. We laughed till the important official with the glasses just shook his head, like a peddler's rattle, and grew red in the face at our derision.

Afterward the knot of officials took off for the little bridge, where they shoveled off the surface dirt and washed away the mud. Little by little they shoveled and washed until they had scrubbed the entire stele as clean and bright as if they were washing the face of a new bride—only they didn't apply any face cream. The bespectacled important official slowly walked out onto the bridge, knelt down, and then on hands and knees went over the bridge inch by inch with a magnifying glass. He scrutinized it for a long time and examined it thoroughly, as though he was picking lice. But when he didn't see anything, didn't even catch a single louse, he began to weep and took out his handkerchief to wipe his tears. Here he was, in his seventies. He hadn't been hit, hadn't gone broke, and looked healthy and fit, so what was he crying for? He wept so sadly, like someone whose young wife had died, that people thought it was hilarious. Maybe city folks were just lachrymose.

Later, when he had done enough crying, he told us to carry the stele back to where it belonged and set it up in its original position. Easier said than done. Who owes you anything? If we had that kind of energy, we'd go gather manure for the fields. As soon as we heard what he said, we took off in a furor. It was as though we all knew how to make ourselves invisible, and in the twinkling of an eye, there wasn't a soul to be seen. The important official with the glasses again shook his head and sighed. He pulled out a wad of cash, and suddenly everyone popped out of the ground again in a commotion. In the twinkling of an eye we formed a knot and vied and fought to lift the stele, nearly coming to blows. We got a rope and some poles and, laughing and yelling, enthusiastically and gladly lifted it, as though we were carrying the sedan chair of a bride. We were joyful the whole way and chatting as we went. Thank heaven! Lucky for us we dug up the grave that year. If we hadn't used the stele for a bridge then, how'd we have come by these wages now? It sure beats selling firewood. We'll make a few bucks walking this little ways and be able to buy pounds of salt, enough to last a family for half a year. Deals like this are scarcer than hen's teeth. It's a shame they're so few. If a deal like this came along every day, that'd be great! Really great!

And what about Xi Shuge? There was no sign of him. The old bastard didn't show his face till the next day, when he turned in the rubbing of the stele's inscription. The important official with the glasses read it over and over, back and forth, growing happy and beginning to smile as he read on. Forgetting he was an important official, he began bowing to Xi Shuge, bending his waist and bowing his back till his head nearly bumped the ground. He bowed three times in a row. This society's values are really out of whack and upside-down. Rocks from the ditches are rolling uphill, piglets in the mountains are eating tigers, important officials are beginning to bow to commoners. What is this world coming to, anyway? Xi Shuge began to cry. When we plucked out his beard, he laughed; now he was crying without even an ouch or an itch. He cried till his face was streaming with tears and, bending his waist, bowed thrice in return. What was this? Bowing back and forth without the slightest embarrassment right in front of everyone, like a
bride and groom at a wedding. Too bad they were men, old ones at that. A young guy and girl bowing to each other might be worth watching, but this was almost no fun at all!

The important official with the glasses said that Xu Shuge had saved a national treasure and gave him five hundred dollars. Blushing, Xu Shuge declined it. He put on a convincing act and wouldn’t take it, no matter what. He even said that he had not done his part as a Chinese. His fancy phrases were spoken very eloquently, but this is what scholars are good at. They can use pretty words. The two of them passed the five hundred dollars back and forth for a long time and uttered a couple of bushels of courtesies. Xu Shuge wouldn’t accept and wouldn’t accept and accepted it, after all. Turn down money? Huh! Pretending he’s honest! Even a sober man can pretend to be drunk! A little money, twenty or thirty cents, is no big deal, but five hundred dollars—he’d have to have been out of his mind to turn it down for real.

The dung beetle left, belching smoke from its butt.

Xu Shuge had suddenly become the richest man in the village. Shit! We broke our backs carrying that stone stele back and forth and only got a few dollars out of it. We never guessed we’d make him rich by attacking him all those times. Hold on, hold on! If we hadn’t obliterated the words on the stele, that piece of paper of his wouldn’t be worth a damn! Five hundred! Why, it wouldn’t be worth fifty cents. Five cents, for that matter. Hell, if you gave it to somebody to wipe his ass with, he’d complain that it was already soiled. Step by step, thanks to us, five hundred dollars was ground out of that stele. What about it? He had to make some gesture and have a little heart.

So, we hemmed Xu Shuge in. We followed him to the fields, and we followed him home. Day and night we smiled at him, smiled and smiled. Pair upon pair of smiling eyes stared at his pockets. If you think you can have it all, nothing doing. You’re going to have to share the wealth.

“C’mon! You’re a reasonable guy!”
“C’mon! Go fifty-fifty with us!”
“C’mon! We ought to all get a little!”
“C’mon! Buy everyone a few drinks!”
“C’mon!”
“C’mon!”

Each “C’mon” was said with a laugh, but the laughter was phony; the resentment was real. Xu Shuge laughed, too, just as he had laughed when they pulled out his beard. Someone would “C’mon” him a while, and he’d laugh a while. Someone would “C’mon” him some more, and he’d laugh some more. The old bastard laughed all right, but he didn’t hand over a cent. He just hedged about and acted silly. You may be a piece of knotty elm, but a sharp enough axe can split anything. You’d better do what’s right. Rocks struck Xu Shuge’s house in the middle of the night. When he opened his door in the morning, he stepped in a pile of shit. The garlic was pulled up in

his garden and covered the ground. There were holes wherever he stepped. We kept on smiling at him. Sooner or later he ought to understand. Sooner or later he ought to realize that people are only human. But Xu Shuge smiled right back, smile for smile, as if he understood nothing, realized nothing, and had nothing bothering him. After smiling his way through several days, Xu Shuge suddenly disappeared and didn’t show his face for three days and nights. The old bastard must have gotten scared out of his wits and run away for fear we’d kidnap him. Or had he died? We were afraid. A case involving human life is a matter of utmost importance and not to be trifled with. Don’t get covered with stench before you get the skunk. My gosh, should the authorities get tough, we’d wind up in prison, even if we weren’t beheaded. We dragged the ponds, searched the hills, and hunted the woods but couldn’t find hide nor hair of him. There wasn’t a trace of the old bastard and no corpse. Somebody must have decided to kill him for the money, then cut up his body and bury it. It was pretty scary. Who was it? The whole village was whispering. So-and-so threw the rocks. So-and-so put the shit in front of the door. So-and-so pulled up the garlic. So-and-so . . . Before the authorities had even arrived to get tough, we began pointing fingers at each other. So-and-so bought a new piece of clothing. Where’d the money come from? So-and-so was smoking expensive cigarettes. Where’d the money come from? So-and-so bought some meat to eat. Where’d the money come from? So-and-so . . . The more we looked at each other, the more thought we gave to it, the more finger-pointing we did. You incriminate me, I incriminate him, he incriminates you, and so forth until the entire village is incriminated as a bunch of murderers. The village was incredibly edgy. People shut and barred their doors before it even got dark and quit having anything to do with one another. A human heart lies under the skin, a tiger’s lies under a pelt. Who knew who the killer was? Don’t get implicated. There’s nothing wrong with being careful.

There’s no wall but lets in the wind. When you talk at home, the walls have ears; when you talk on the road, there are people in the grass. Whenever someone said who the killer was, the accused always knew. Shit! Incriminating an innocent person. You’re out to do me in. But you ought not to mess around with me. I’m red-blooded, and hot-blooded, too. We started going to each other’s houses, interrogating, squabbling, cursing, and fighting. One by one heads were broken and blood flowed, but no one was willing to stop. Dying’s dying. If we’re sent to court, that means dying, too, so what the hell! Everyone in the village was crying or shouting frantically, which set the chickens allying and dogs jumping over fences. Everyone said he’d been wronged and wanted to get even and take revenge. They put on a play far better than a real one—and you didn’t have to spend any money to buy a ticket.

After several days, Xu Shuge returned, followed by several workmen.
Only then did the village calm down, yet in a sense it was even less calm. Again we went to Xu Shuge’s house and, scrambling to vent our anger, let forth a bellyful of spite. “Shit! Everyone said I killed you! If you hadn’t shown up, I’d have fallen victim to my accusers, and they’d have had my head for sure!”

“Shit! Some people made unfounded attacks on me and said I cut you up into chunks!”

“Shit! I ate a little meat, so they said I killed you and stole the money!”

“Shit! My cousin gave me a good pack of smokes, and smoking them nearly made me a murderer!”

“Shit! . . .”

Xu Shuge just laughed. He didn’t say who was right or who was wrong. Without uttering a word, he led the workmen down to the small stream and built a bridge over it. He used every bit of that five hundred dollars to complete the bridge. It was a wide bridge, level and stable. The cement bridge replaced the stone stele and was much better for walking than the stone stele bridge had been.

As we walked over this proper little bridge, we talked about the important official with the glasses and about that old bastard Xu Shuge. Once again we had a common language and cast aside our former enmity and hatred. Those two old scoundrels were really oddballs, really a joke. The important official with the glasses was a certified nut. Instead of staying at home and enjoying his great good fortune, he came all the way to this ancient hollow deep in the mountains to cry, to bow, to give away money. Worrying about the ancients—now if that’s not a case of crying over a play. Calling the rubbing a national treasure. Balls! Was it resistant to hunger and cold? Could it fend off the guns of foreigners? He must have been delicious from chills and fever. How much meat could you buy with five hundred dollars? Why, enough to satisfy your palate for years. He was happy just to buy a piece of blackened paper, as though he was sharing in great glory. And Xu Shuge’s not normal, either. Could someone normal show so little regard for money? He goes to all the trouble—having been attacked and beaten and having had his beard pulled out—of trading the rubbing for five hundred dollars and spends every last cent building a bridge. Couldn’t he have gone and bought a steamed bun to eat every day? He didn’t have the slightest idea how to flaunt it. Build a bridge and everyone’ll use it, but who’s gonna feel obliged to you for it? If you gave somebody a hundred or two, or even thirty or fifty, or even three or five, or even gave somebody a cigarette, everyone would say good things about you. But what son-of-a-bitch is gonna say anything good now? They were really a pair of lunatics, a couple of dolts. They’d both read themselves stupid, read themselves muddle-headed. What good ever came of all their reading!

After we were done laughing, we were all regretful. Extremely regretful.

It would have been far better had we ourselves secretly made rubbings at the outset. My gosh, if they gave five hundred dollars for one sheet of blackened paper, that was the equivalent of selling several big hogs, was enough to go after a wife. Such luck! If we’d made ten or twenty rubbings, my god, how much would that have been? We’d have really been rich, with enough to get ten wives and screw a different one each day. What a way to go!

After we were done with the regrets, we started in hating—hating Xu Shuge. The old bastard really sucks. He obviously knew it was worth money. If he had tipped us off at the outset and let everybody print up a few copies, then we’d all have gotten a little money to spend. Relatives help relatives and neighbors help neighbors. Even Lord Guan still helps his folks in Shanxi. But that old bastard wouldn’t help out his fellow villagers. All scholars have treacherous hearts. They’re truly malicious, truly cruel. They want to have things all to themselves. It served you right to have your beard pulled out. It wasn’t the least bit unfair. Judging from how malicious you’ve been, next time we’ll pull out your hair as well.

Laughter, regret, hatred, every last one of them faded from memory in the fullness of time. They vanished and passed away, as though a strong wind had blown by and left neither shadow nor trace.

But the little stream had a cement bridge that would stand for a thousand years.

And the stone stele in front of the original site of the big grave had lost its inscription forever.

From then on, every morning and evening, whether it was clear or rainy, winter or summer, Xu Shuge always walked slowly to the site with the aid of his stick, stood before the stone stele, looked up and read the blank surface, as if it still bore many elegant pieces of writing. He would read for a long time, reading very carefully, very excitedly, reading under his breath, reading and reading until the tears covered his face.

To commemorate this stone stele that was originally blank, was later inscribed, and now, after a thousand years, is no longer inscribed, I have specifically written this record.