

Plays for Young Audiences

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY-MINNEAPOLIS

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Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like

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Adaptation by
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Characters

Han—*an orphan with aspirations*
Ping—*his pet pig, very loyal*
the Hermit—*fat, old, and unimpressive*
the Army Captain—*very brave*
the Merchant—*very rich*
the Mandarin—*very important*
the Messenger—*not all that he appears*
a Servant—*kind*
a Guard—*greedy*
a Librarian—*informative*
assorted Townspeople, Guards, *and* Wild Horsemen

Place

Assorted places around the city of Wu,
nestled high in the northern mountains of China

Time

Long ago

ACT 1.

At the gates of the city of Wu, nestled high in the northern mountains of China. Also visible is the entrance to a cave and a path to elsewhere.

It is recommended that the set be made almost entirely of paper or cloth banners and two-dimensional flats, both to evoke the non-naturalistic perspective of Chinese painting and to make it easier for swift and fluid scene changes.

HAN, a young orphan, demonstrates military prowess for a small pet pig, PING.

HAN: First, one must show respect. My enemy stands there, I stand here, and we both bow, like this.

HAN bows with gravity.

Then, with my broom—when I become a proper warrior, I'll have a staff instead, which, uhm...it's a sort of...*special* stick, that only proper warriors get to carry around. And they go: Ha! Ho! Hee!

HAN gestures impressively with his broom with each cry.

And I go whack whack whack!

PING squeals, frightened. HAN comforts the pig.

Shh! You don't need to be frightened! I won't ever hurt you. But this intruder is very, very scared, and cries out—

HAN now pretends to be the intruder.

Oh please don't hurt me please don't hurt me!

HAN becomes himself again, the mighty warrior.

Huh! You thought you could attack the mighty city of Wu! You didn't reckon with the powerful gate-keeper! (*aside to PING:*) That's me! (*to the intruder:*) As my prisoner, you will be thrown in prison! Do you know what they eat in prison? Mashed turnips! And rutabagas!

As the intruder:

(a loud wail of anguish and terror:) Turnips! Rutabagas! Whoaaa! Help me!
Please! Help!

Suddenly, the HERMIT calls out from offstage:

HERMIT: Stop that!

The HERMIT comes running up the path. HAN and PING stare at his.

Stop that! Stop...

The HERMIT stops and looks to and fro for the source of the commotion she heard a moment ago.

Funny, I thought I heard someone calling for help...

HAN: Oh! That was me.

HERMIT: Are you in some danger?

HAN: No, I was practicing.

HERMIT: Practicing calling for help?

HAN: No, I was...playing a game. I didn't mean to concern you, most gracious traveler.

HERMIT: Funny sort of game. What are you doing playing games in the middle of these wild mountains?

HAN: I sweep the gates of the city—have you come to visit the city of Wu?

HERMIT: City of...what city?

The HERMIT suddenly sees the gates.

Gah!! Where did this come from?!? Who put this city on my doorstep?

HAN: The city of Wu has been here for 500 years.

HERMIT: Hmm, when I was leaving to visit my nieces and nephews, there was some ragged wanderer, with a bushy, filthy beard, building a hut.

HAN: Thousands of people live in the city of Wu.

HERMIT: These dwellings spring up overnight, like weeds! Well, you'll have to take all this somewhere else.

HAN: Move the city?

HERMIT: Yes, I've come home now, I don't want people in my front yard.

HAN: Where do you live?

HERMIT: Right here, of course.

The HERMIT indicates the entrance to the cave.

HAN: No one lives there.

HERMIT: I do, I live there.

HAN: But I play in there—it's just an empty cave.

HERMIT: No more trespassing! The impertinence! Playing in my living room when my back is turned! See, that's why you all have to go.

HAN: Most gracious cave-dweller, the city of Wu is enormous and very very heavy.

HERMIT: That's not my problem, it's yours. You don't want me to puff out my cheeks and blow this city off the mountain! No doubt there are lots of clay pots and wooden stools and small children like yourself—things that get easily broken. So you'd better do the moving yourself. I'm going to take a nap, I've had a very long trip and I'm very tired, and when I wake up, I'm going to want a nice lunch, with some dumplings and egg rolls and some tasty bean curd, and I expect all of—

She gestures vaguely at the city.

—all of *that*—pffh! Gone!

The HERMIT vanishes into her cave. HAN turns to PING.

HAN: Ping, we must be nice to crazy people, even though they are very very annoying, because they cannot help being crazy. Some of them live inside trees or boxes or caves because they have no one to take care of them. This is why everyone must learn to take care of themselves. This is why I'm going to be a soldier. Soldiers are strong and brave! They dress themselves in shiny metal,

bright armor than gleams in the sun and dazzles the eyes of all who walk by! Everyone respects soldiers! Everyone will respect me! Where did that nasty criminal go?

Han's SHADOW comes to life and starts tiptoe-ing away. PING squeals in alarm. The SHADOW immediately becomes Han's shadow once again.

HAN: Oh, Ping—it's just pretend.

The SHADOW begins to tiptoe away again. HAN spots the SHADOW's sneakiness and uses his broom handle to trip the SHADOW, who falls.

Hah! Don't think you can escape!

SHADOW: No, no, most impressive and well-paid city guard, please don't make me eat turnips and rutabagas!

HAN: I should! Because you are a brute and a criminal!

As HAN recites the following, the MERCHANT rolls up with a heavily-laden cart.

You stepped on pretty blue flowers!

SHADOW: No!

HAN: You threw rocks at helpless baby birds in their nests!

SHADOW: Not me!

HAN: You said bad words to a poor old woman at the market!

MERCHANT: Goodness, what a rascal of a pig, saying nasty words.

HAN: *(startled)* Oh!

The SHADOW becomes Han's shadow once again.

MERCHANT: I hope you're going to give that pig a good thrashing for its crimes.

HAN: No, no, the pig didn't steal anything—I was talking to myself.

MERCHANT: *You* said bad words to an old woman?

HAN: No, no! It was a game. I was practicing.

MERCHANT: Practicing to curse? Your parents should punish you!

HAN: Sir, I—my parents are...are away, in another city—sir, I would never curse!
I'm practicing to be a soldier!

MERCHANT: A soldier! Why?

HAN: Because....

MERCHANT: Yes?

HAN: Soldiers are very important! Everyone depends on them to protect the city!

MERCHANT: Hmph! Our soldiers puff themselves up when they march in
parades, but they couldn't fight off a pack of hungry kittens.

HAN: But they make lots of money!

MERCHANT: Soldiers? (*He laughs.*) Merchants are the ones who make money!

HAN: They do?

MERCHANT: Absolutely! Why, people flock to my cart because they want to buy—

*The MERCHANT lifts the lid of his cart, creating a small puppet stage.
Beautiful feathers float into view.*

Beautiful feathers from the southern woods!

HAN: Ooh!

Bottles of perfume float up from the cart.

MERCHANT: Intoxicating perfumes from the hills in the east!

HAN: Ahh!

Illustrated fans float up from the cart.

MERCHANT: Illustrated fans from the cities in the west!

HAN: Pretty!

HAN reaches out to touch one.

MERCHANT: Ah ah ah—

The MERCHANT holds out his hand for payment.

HAN: I have no money. Maybe I should become a merchant.

MERCHANT: An excellent notion! But you know, money isn't everything. Perhaps you have something of value to trade?

HAN: I have nothing.

MERCHANT: I see a broom in your hands. I might take this ratty old broom in exchange for, say...this splendid knife.

The MERCHANT pulls a beautiful knife from his cart.

Made from the purest iron, hammered into shape by skilled blacksmiths and sharpened to a razor's edge—

The MERCHANT plucks a hair from HAN's head—

HAN: Ow!

—and cuts it in two with a lazy swipe of the knife. HAN is dazzled.

MERCHANT: Do you like it?

HAN: I do—but I have to sweep the gates of the city, it's my job—

MERCHANT: *(with a theatrical sigh)* I thought you wanted to be more than a mere gate-sweeper. I thought you wanted to be a soldier, and soldiers need knives...ah well...

He puts the knife back in his cart.

HAN: I'll take it!

MERCHANT: A wise choice.

The MERCHANT pulls out a knife—a much less impressive knife—and hands it to HAN while taking the broom.

HAN: But...

MERCHANT: Yes?

HAN: This isn't the knife you just showed me.

MERCHANT: That other knife was my display model—used, dusty, speckled with rust—this is brand new! Now look at this umbrella.

The MERCHANT pulls out an umbrella and opens it.

Young sir, how often do you stand at this gate, rain pelting down upon your head, soaking into your clothes until your teeth chatter like a monkey's?

HAN: All the time!

MERCHANT: Then I will trade you this fine umbrella for...hmm...your shoes.

HAN: My shoes?

MERCHANT: You *need* this umbrella.

HAN: But I need my shoes too.

MERCHANT: Nonsense! Why, the holy monks of the Tai-Shu monastery wander the high mountains all day long on their bare feet. It's more pious to be barefoot.

HAN: But the path is full of sharp rocks—

The MERCHANT pulls out a watering can and sprinkles water on HAN's head.

MERCHANT: Brrrr....

HAN: I'll take it.

He pulls off his shoes. PING squeals in dismay. The MERCHANT exchanges the umbrella for another one from his cart. They trade items.

MERCHANT: You won't regret it. Now, look at this.

The MERCHANT pulls out a lychee nut. HAN stares at it blankly.

HAN: What's that?

MERCHANT: (*impressively*) *This...is a lychee nut.*

HAN: Oh.

The MERCHANT waits expectantly for HAN to ooh and aah. Instead:

What's a lychee nut?

MERCHANT: What an ignorant child you are! Lychee nuts are the tastiest, most scrumptious fruit in all the world!

HAN: If it's fruit, why do you call it a nut?

MERCHANT: Eh, uhm—What a ridiculous question! Our imperial Mandarin, magnificent ruler of the city of Wu—a person of impeccable taste and splendor!—the Mandarin demands all manner of delicious fruits—the ripest plums and freshest apricots—

HAN: (*overwhelmed at the thought*) Mmmm—

MERCHANT: —but lychee nuts are his very, very favorite.

HAN: I'll give you my umbrella!

MERCHANT: I already have umbrellas.

HAN: Take my knife!

MERCHANT: I already have knives.

HAN: I have nothing else!

The MERCHANT smells the lychee nut, savoring the aroma.

MERCHANT: Aaaahhh..

HAN: I want it! I want it!

MERCHANT: Then give me your pig.

PING squeals.

HAN: My pig?

MERCHANT: Small, scrawny, inconsequential—hardly a scrap of meat on its bones—this lychee nut will be the experience of a lifetime!

HAN: But—anything else—

MERCHANT: What else do you have?

HAN: Nothing.

MERCHANT: How tasteless and empty your life must be. No doubt you eat nothing but turnips and rutabagas.

The MERCHANT starts to put away the lychee nut. In a panic, HAN grabs up PING and offers the pig to the MERCHANT. PING squeals in horror.

HAN: Please! Take him! I want the lychee nut!

The smiling MERCHANT delicately takes the squirming PING from HAN and holds out the lychee nut. HAN eagerly snatches it from the MERCHANT's hand.

MERCHANT: I hope you're very happy with your purchases. Now open the gates, I have a fabulous invention to sell to the Mandarin, magnificent ruler of the city of Wu.

The MERCHANT whistles as he tucks everything back into his cart. He tries to push PING inside of a box. Just as HAN is about to take a bite of the lychee nut, PING pops out and squeals. HAN finds himself unable to taste the fruit. He tries again, but PING squeals again, even more mournfully. Heartbroken, HAN turns to the MERCHANT.

HAN: Most gracious Merchant, I don't want this lychee nut after all.

MERCHANT: You seemed most eager for it a moment ago.

HAN: I was, but now...please, I'd like to return it.

MERCHANT: But you've touched it. You've even breathed on it. For all I know, flecks of your saliva have fallen on its delicate skin.

HAN: I didn't do anything to it!

MERCHANT: Fruit is so tender. I couldn't possibly re-sell it in that condition.
Open the gates.

As they talk, the gate opens and a SERVANT enters from within the city.

HAN: Please, may I have my pig back?

MERCHANT: My fine pig? For used fruit? Don't be ridiculous.

HAN: But Ping has been with me—

MERCHANT: Ping? Who's Ping? *My pig's name is Confucius!* See how wise he looks?

HAN: My pig is my only friend!

MERCHANT: But you traded him for a piece of fruit.

HAN: I know.

MERCHANT: You're not much of a friend, if you traded your friend away.

HAN: I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Please, trade him back! Please!

MERCHANT: *Your* mistakes are not *my* responsibility. Now—

SERVANT: My, my, my, what a wonderful cart, full of delightful things!

The MERCHANT is startled, but quickly responds to the prospect of a new customer.

MERCHANT: Can I interest you in something, sir?

SERVANT: Oh, yes, in just one moment—Han, I've brought your daily cup of rice.

HAN: I'm not hungry.

SERVANT: But it's Friday! You get a small spoonful of mashed turnips and rutabagas!

HAN: I don't deserve it.

SERVANT: But this is what the illustrious Mandarin of Wu, my noble master, pays you to sweep the gates.

HAN: Give it to someone else.

SERVANT: Hmm, I'll just set it here and see if your appetite improves. Now, what have we here...

MERCHANT: Perhaps I can interest you in a broom.

SERVANT: Oh dear, last week the judicious Mandarin put an enormous tax on brooms. Anyone who sells brooms must pay the Mandarin ten coins.

MERCHANT: Ten coins! But the broom only costs five!

SERVANT: I know, but the Mandarin is wise in all things. What else?

MERCHANT: Hmm! Hmm! Perhaps a pair of shoes for your children?

SERVANT: I'm sorry, but the Mandarin—just yesterday!—said all children must go barefoot, like the monks of the Tai Shu Monastery. For their spiritual benefit, the Mandarin says; only this gate-sweeper is allowed to wear shoes any more. Peculiar, isn't it? But the Mandarin knows best.

MERCHANT: How about a pig? A nice plump pig, ready for roasting?

PING squeals with fright. HAN, horrified, presses his hands over his ears.

SERVANT: Yesterday I would have happily purchased this handsome pig, but this very morning the Mandarin has forbidden pigs from the city of Wu.

MERCHANT: But that's ridiculous!

SERVANT: I thought so too, but who am I to say? I was standing in the throne room when he made his decree. "No more pigs!" he declared, in his fierce, commanding voice, and he scowled until everyone grew very frightened. Only this young boy is allowed to keep a pig, for he spends almost all his time outside the city gates. The Mandarin's decision is final.

MERCHANT: But what am I to do?

SERVANT: The people of Wu need some things very much, things like...

The SERVANT casts an eye over HAN's belongings.

Knives, for example, everyone needs new knives, and umbrellas—the weather has been terrible lately—and do you have any lychee nuts? The Mandarin just declared that all pregnant women must eat a dozen lychee nuts every day, and our fruitsellers have sold them all in less than a week!

MERCHANT: A dozen every day!

SERVANT: The Mandarin believes they are good for the brain. And our children have not been so wise of late.

The MERCHANT turns to HAN.

MERCHANT: Young sir, you wanted your pig back—I rudely said no. I was possessed by a strange fever, which has now gone away. May I see that dusty old lychee nut?

Hopefully, HAN offers the lychee nut.

Not bruised at all. No sensible person would object. Will you be so generous as to trade a humble lychee nut for this charming but forbidden pig?

HAN: Yes! Yes yes yes!

The MERCHANT hands PING back to HAN, who clutches PING in his arms. PING squeals happily.

MERCHANT: And this umbrella, and this knife—perhaps you would like to trade them for this broom and this pair of shoes?

SERVANT: Oh, that would be silly, the umbrella and knife are worth so much more! Han is very clever, he wouldn't accept such a trade unless...

MERCHANT: Unless...?

The SERVANT turns to HAN expectantly.

HAN: *(tentatively)* I see a tiny scrap of red ribbon in the back of your cart.

SERVANT: I think a bit of red ribbon might make a certain pig look very handsome.

MERCHANT: Young sir, will you accept this ribbon as a gesture of my admiration for your bargaining skills?

HAN considers the offer.

HAN: Hmmmm...Yes.

The MERCHANT gathers up the knife and umbrella, returning the broom and shoes to HAN.

MERCHANT: I must go see the Mandarin at once! Once I sell him this amazing new invention, I'm sure he'll change his mind about these strange commands—except for the lychee nuts for pregnant women, very sensible. Open the gates!

The SERVANT holds open the gates and the MERCHANT passes quickly into the city.

HAN bows down to the SERVANT.

HAN: Thank you thank you thank you!

SERVANT: No no, no need. I have to go back to the palace now.

HAN: Please, please thank the Mandarin for his great wisdom, which has saved the life of my poor pig!

SERVANT: The Mandarin! Dear child, I work in the kitchen. I never even see the great Mandarin.

HAN: But you said he scowled and everyone grew very frightened!

SERVANT: Well, I'm sure if he ever scowled at me, I would be frightened. You should just eat your rice now, and be grateful that the Mandarin is so generous. Especially with that spoonful of turnips!

HAN: You said he spoke in a fierce, commanding voice...

SERVANT: And you should be generous too, and tie that pretty ribbon around the neck of your friend there, or your friend may not think you're such a good friend after all. I'll be back tomorrow with another cup of rice.

The SERVANT exits. HAN watches him depart, a little confused, then embraces PING again.

HAN: I will never, never, never never give you away again! Please forgive me!

PING squeals and kisses HAN's face. HAN ties the ribbon around PING's neck.

Ping, when I grow up, I'm going to protect everyone from wicked merchants!

Han's SHADOW springs up and becomes a pompous merchant.

SHADOW: Hmm! Hmm! You there! Look at all this pretty cloth and tasty food! I'll bet you'd like some, wouldn't you?

HAN manipulates PING as a poor peasant:

HAN: Yes, yes, I'm very cold and hungry!

PING squeals.

SHADOW: I see you are too poor to afford such soft and delicious things—perhaps— Give me one of your children, and I'll give you this apricot.

HAN: But I love my children! I couldn't possibly—

SHADOW: Smell this delicious apricot.

HAN: No, no...no...mmm....oh, it smells so delicious...I have so many children, maybe I won't miss just one...

PING squeals in dismay. HAN leaps up and adopts his guard persona:

What's going on here? Foolish peasant! What could be more important than your children? And you, you nasty merchant! Tempting this starving peasant, his belly empty and his head even emptier! I think, as punishment, you should have to eat this spoonful of mashed turnips!

SHADOW: Wugh, no! Anything but that! Let me go and I'll give you this lovely umbrella!

HAN: I need no umbrella! The respect of the people will keep me dry! I have been trained by the Army Captain of Wu! He is so fierce and ferocious—

At this point, the ARMY CAPTAIN enters, weary from a long journey up the mountainside. PING squeals, but HAN doesn't notice.

—that he eats nothing but turnips and rutabagas all day long, and he likes them! And he spansk cruel and heartless merchants like yourself! The Army

Captain has trained me well—but I confess, I have a kind heart. Do *you* have children?

SHADOW: I have dozens of children! I have two hundred children, all of them hungry and in need of shoes!

HAN: (*with a deep sigh*) I know how it feels to be hungry. I know how it feels to need shoes. For the sake of your children, I will let you go home. Be grateful I'm not the Army Captain! He is not so soft-hearted as I am!

PING squeals again, but HAN ignores him.

The Army Captain would take his staff and—

HAN sweeps his broom around and smacks it into the CAPTAIN, who is unruffled by the weak blow. HAN freezes. His SHADOW falls to the ground once again. The CAPTAIN studies HAN for a moment.

CAPTAIN: Yours is the face I see every morning, peering over the wall of my army's training yard. Am I right?

HAN: Sir, welcome home to Wu, sir, let me brush the dust from your path, sir.

HAN sweeps the path in front of the CAPTAIN. The CAPTAIN suddenly grabs the broom away from HAN.

CAPTAIN: Suppose you had no weapon to fight with. Have you learned any lessons about that?

HAN: ...no...

CAPTAIN: Then let me teach you a lesson right now.

He tosses the broom aside.

Hit me.

HAN: What?

CAPTAIN: Right here.

He indicates his chin.

HAN: You're the captain of the army, I couldn't hit you!

CAPTAIN: Go ahead. I'm telling you to. I'm ordering you to, or I'll have you arrested.

HAN: But I'll be arrested for hitting you!

CAPTAIN: I promise you won't.

HAN: No matter how hard I hit you?

CAPTAIN: No matter how hard.

HAN swings wildly. The CAPTAIN easily turns the blow's momentum against HAN and flips him to the ground.

Hit me again.

HAN: I didn't hit you the first time!

CAPTAIN: Try again. Kick me, if you feel like it.

HAN hesitates, then lashes out with his foot. Again, the CAPTAIN flips him to the ground.

I'll give you one more try.

HAN: No, no, that's okay, I've tried enough.

The CAPTAIN laughs.

CAPTAIN: A great warrior never stops trying! If you're going to grow up to be a soldier, you'll have to learn more than how to fight—you'll have to learn how to be brave!

The CAPTAIN laughs again. He goes through the gate, leaving it open behind him.

HAN: (to PING:) I guess I'm not very brave. Maybe I'm not meant to be a soldier after all.

PING squeals consolingly.

Maybe I should become a Mandarin. The Mandarin is very important and very frightening. No one is mean to him. I will practice.

HAN makes a frightening face. He turns to PING and scowls. PING squeals and buries his snout in his forelegs.

I'm sorry! It's only me, it's not a scary Mandarin.

HAN cradles PING in his arms.

I don't know what I want to be anymore. But I have to take care of you, and you have to take care of me. We have to find some way to take care of each other.

Suddenly, a MESSENGER staggers on, about to faint from exhaustion.

MESSENGER: Take me to the Mandarin! (*wheeze*) I must speak (*cough, gasp*) to the Mandarin!

HAN: (*discreetly*) Ping, I do not want to grow up and have his job.

MESSENGER: (*wheeze*) I must see the Mandarin right away!

The MESSENGER begins rubbing his blistered feet.

HAN: Who are you?

MESSENGER: I am a monk from the Tai-Shu Monastery (*gasp*) and I have an important message for the Mandarin! (*wheeze*) Take me to the palace!

HAN: To the palace! But I—I've never been allowed to—

MESSENGER: The city is in terrible danger! I must see the Mandarin at once!

HAN: Oh! I will take you! Follow me!

HAN picks up PING and his cup of rice.

(*to PING*) Oh—but I can't bring you to the palace—the Mandarin would be very angry! Unless—maybe the Mandarin didn't really say "no pigs", maybe that was just a trick—I'd better not take the chance! (*to the MESSENGER*) Noble monk, I have to take my pig home, and then we will go to the palace. It will only take a moment! Follow me!

HAN sets off. The MESSENGER, wincing with every step, follows.

The actors manipulate the banners and set-pieces, creating a whirling spectacle as HAN and the MESSENGER enter the city of Wu. They come to a small, rude hut.

MESSENGER: This miserable hut is your home?

HAN: This...? No, no, of course not—I live in that grand house over there, with my parents! This is where my pig lives.

MESSENGER: Large hut for such a small pig.

HAN: Well—that’s because we also keep our horses here!

MESSENGER: You have horses?

HAN: Only two.

MESSENGER: Two horses fit in this hut?

HAN: Well—not the horses themselves—don’t be silly! This hut is full of oats and hay. We keep the horses on the other side of our house, you can’t see the stable from here.

MESSENGER: Young sir, my feet are terribly blistered from my journey. Might your parents—who I’m sure are most generous—have a bandage I could put on my poor unhappy feet?

HAN: My parents are out riding our horses, so they can’t help you, but I promise they have bandages at the palace—and we’re going there right now!

As the MESSENGER rubs his feet, HAN speaks quietly to PING:

Now, you stay inside, and you guard this rice, because I’m going to be very hungry when I get back. Do you want this spoonful of turnips?

PING shakes his head in revulsion.

I understand. Can you wait for me to get home before you eat any rice?

PING licks HAN’s face. HAN kisses PING and sets him and the cup of rice inside the hut.

Let’s go!

Again the actors use banners and two-dimensional images to create a colorful journey through the city of Wu, in which rickshaw drivers dash about, musicians play on the street, and children run around with kites.

At last, HAN and the MESSENGER arrive at the palace gates. A GUARD stands lazily. As HAN discourses with the GUARD, the MESSENGER rubs his feet.

GUARD: (*yawning*) Who goes there?

HAN: It's me, Han!

GUARD: Han who?

HAN: I'm the guard of the gates to the city!

GUARD: There's no guard, there's only—oh, you must be that little boy who sweeps dirt.

HAN: (*to the MESSENGER*) Pffh! The palace guards are horribly jealous of me!

GUARD: What's your business?

HAN: This monk from the Tai Shu monastery has an important message for the Mandarin!

GUARD: Hmm, yes, very important I'm sure.

He makes a subtle "grease my palm" gesture.

HAN: So, you must open the gate for us.

GUARD: Yes, I happily shall, if your message is *important*...

He makes a very obvious "pay up" gesture.

HAN: (*sotto voce, to the MESSENGER*) Is something wrong with his hand?

MESSENGER: I think he wants a bribe.

HAN: Oh! Do you have any money?

MESSENGER: No.

HAN: Uhm. Me neither. *(to the GUARD)* Good sir, we will offer you a generous tip when we come back, for the Mandarin will shower gold on this messenger's head.

GUARD: Hmmph. I don't think your message is very important at all

He turns his back on them.

MESSENGER: What can we do?

HAN: Hmm. *(loudly)* Most pious monk, didn't you say your message came from the Emperor himself?

MESSENGER: I didn't say—

HAN: *(discreetly, so the GUARD can't hear his)* Shh! I have a plan!

MESSENGER: Oh—Yes, I spoke with the Emperor this morning!

GUARD: How could he have spoken with the Emperor this morning, when the Capitol City is two weeks away by horse?

HAN: Ah...

MESSENGER: Eh...

HAN: He didn't mean spoke!

MESSENGER: No, no!

HAN: He received a message from the Emperor!

MESSENGER: Yes, yes!

GUARD: How?

HAN: How?

GUARD: Yes—how?

HAN: By—bird!

MESSENGER: Bird?

HAN: Specially trained ducks!

GUARD: Are they talking ducks?

HAN: Uh—don't be silly! They have little messages tied to their legs—it's a new and very advanced technology, you probably haven't heard about it yet—

MESSENGER: I only just heard about it myself!

GUARD: Huh. You learn something new every day.

HAN: So you have to let us in!

GUARD: I still don't know how *important* your message is...

Again, he gestures with his hand for money.

HAN: I guess you won't see the Mandarin today, most noble monk.

MESSENGER: But I have to!

HAN: Your order will just have to wait.

MESSENGER: What order?

HAN: The order to give a bonus to all imperial servants.

MESSENGER: That order! Yes, yes it will.

GUARD: What kind of bonus?

MESSENGER: My message is for the ears of the Mandarin alone.

HAN: Yes, only the Mandarin should know that all imperial servants—especially guards, who stand in the sun all day long—they all should get a pound of lychee nuts—oh! I've said too much!

GUARD: A pound of lychee nuts!

MESSENGER: He meant two pounds! That's what the Emperor said!

HAN: He said very loudly: "Two pounds of lychee nuts!" And then he scowled at everyone in the throne room, and they were all very frightened.

GUARD: How do you know? You said the message was sent by a duck!

HAN: It was all written down! The imperial secretaries are very thorough.

GUARD: Two pounds of lychee nuts!

HAN: But maybe we *should* wait.

MESSENGER: What?

GUARD: Why?

HAN: The Emperor changes his mind every day, tomorrow he may order your dinner changed to bread and water, and they'd have to take all those lychee nuts away—

GUARD: Go right on in, most earnest and forthright messenger! Please forgive my thoughtless, stubborn ways! Enter!

The GUARD picks up the palace gates and carries them away. HAN and the MESSENGER enter the palace and are faced with a huge curtain that stretches from wall to wall. To the right is a panel with five large, brightly colored buttons: Green, blue, yellow, red, and orange.

HAN: Hello? Helloooo?

The MANDARIN sticks his head out between the curtains.

MANDARIN: Excellent! Just what I need. An audience!

The MANDARIN emerges fully and turns to look at the curtain. He gestures vaguely towards the panel of buttons.

Go over there and press the green button.

HAN: The what? You mean this?

HAN crosses to the panel and presses the green button.

At once there is the sound of a huge gong and the curtains open very swiftly. On the other side sits an imperial throne. The MANDARIN jumps up and down and claps.

MANDARIN: It works! I love that! How wonderful! Wait—wait, I'm not in the right place. Press that button again.

HAN presses the green button again and the curtains shut. The MANDARIN scurries behind the curtains.

(from off) I'm ready! Press the green button!

HAN presses the green button again and once more there is the sound of a gong and the curtains open very swiftly. This time, the MANDARIN is seated on the throne and has composed himself into a very impressive personage.

Who has come to see the illustrious Mandarin of Wu?

HAN and the MESSENGER are momentarily perplexed.

That's me, come forward, speak.

HAN: Most important Mandarin of Wu, I bring to you a holy monk from the Tai-Shu monastery. He brings a message.

MANDARIN: A message! I love messages. Is it an important message?

MESSENGER: It's a very important message.

MANDARIN: Excellent! You may begin.

MESSENGER: Sir—

MANDARIN: No no no, you should kneel and say, "Most impressive Mandarin of Wu"—start over.

The MESSENGER, with some reluctance, kneels.

MESSENGER: Most impressive Mandarin of Wu, I have traveled across—

MANDARIN: Wait wait wait. I can't possibly hear something this important on an empty stomach.

The MANDARIN rises from his throne and walks to a particular spot in the throne room. He gestures vaguely to the panel of buttons.

Press the blue button.

HAN presses the blue button. There is a loud rumble, then a single plum drops from the ceiling. The MANDARIN catches it deftly and takes a bite.

Mmmm. Delicious.

HAN is agog at this splendid event. The MANDARIN walks back to his throne and sits down, eating his plum.

Go on.

MESSENGER: Most glorious Mandarin—

MANDARIN: “Most glorious,” I like that. Go on.

MESSENGER: Glorious Mandarin of Wu, I come to you from the vast desert—

MANDARIN: Wait wait wait. You did say this was an important message, didn’t you?

MESSENGER: *Very* important.

MANDARIN: Press the yellow button.

HAN presses the yellow button. A mouthpiece extends towards the throne. The MANDARIN speaks into it; his voice reverberates loudly throughout the palace.

The most glorious Mandarin of Wu demands the presence of his trusted advisors for a very important message.

The mouthpiece retracts. Immediately the CAPTAIN and the MERCHANT enter hurriedly. The MANDARIN directs them to where they should stand.

You, Captain of the Army—stand there. You—who are you?

MERCHANT: Ah, I just—the curtain—and the buttons—

MANDARIN: Oh yes, you just sold me this fabulous invention! Yes, you’re very smart, of course I made you my personal advisor—you stand there. (*To the MESSENGER:*) Start over.

MESSENGER: Most fabulous Mandarin of Wu—

MANDARIN: (*delighted*) Fabulous!

MESSENGER: This message comes from the vast deserts of the North—

MANDARIN: Wait wait wait. I'm done with this.

He looks with annoyance at his plum, which is only half-eaten.

Press the red button.

HAN presses the red button. A trapdoor opens in the floor, right at the MESSENGER's feet. The MESSENGER jumps back.

The MANDARIN takes careful aim and tosses his plum into the trapdoor. The trapdoor closes. The CAPTAIN and the MERCHANT applaud politely. HAN is aghast that an unfinished plum got thrown away. The MANDARIN modestly acknowledges their applause as he licks his fingers. He turns back to the infuriated MESSENGER.

Go on.

MESSENGER: (*shouting*) The Wild Horsemen are coming!

With that, the MESSENGER sits on the floor and massages his feet. The MANDARIN pauses for a moment, anticipating something more.

MANDARIN: Is that the message?

MESSENGER: Yes!

MANDARIN: Wild Horsemen, Wild Horsemen— (*to the CAPTAIN and the MERCHANT*) Are they some sort of circus act?

The CAPTAIN and MERCHANT shrug.

MESSENGER: Circus!?! They're a horde of ferocious barbarians!

MANDARIN: Really? How unusual. Press the yellow button again.

HAN presses the yellow button again. Again the mouthpiece extends. As before, the MANDARIN's voice reverberates loudly as he speaks.

Imperial Librarian?

The voice of the LIBRARIAN also reverberates loudly as she is heard over the acoustical system.

LIBRARIAN: (off) Yes, most stupendous Mandarin?

MANDARIN: Wild Horsemen, who are the Wild Horsemen?

LIBRARIAN: (off) One moment...worms...wombats...wildebeest! No—ah, Wild Horsemen of the North...

As the LIBRARIAN speaks, a series of shadow puppets depict WILD HORSEMEN activities.

A tribe of war-like barbarians who live their entire lives on horseback. Their feet never touch the ground. They spend most of their time beating each other up with sticks and rocks.

HAN suddenly glances at the MESSENGER's feet.

MANDARIN: Excellent.

The mouthpiece retracts.

MESSENGER: That's it? That's all?

MANDARIN: Our library is very complete.

MESSENGER: It's not complete at all! The Horsemen are fierce and furious! Bloodthirsty and mad! They don't use rocks, they have swords and spears and thousands of arrows! As they sweep across the plains, their horses tear into the dirt with thunderous blows!

The MESSENGER stamps on the floor, then winces at the pain this causes.

HAN tugs on the MERCHANT's sleeve.

HAN: Excuse me—

MERCHANT: Yes, you insignificant gate-sweeper?

HAN: Didn't you tell me that monks walk barefoot all the time?

MERCHANT: Of course!

MESSENGER: Wild Horsemen wear nothing but leather and fur. They've formed a humongous army, hundreds of thousands of monstrous horse-riding warriors, and they will sweep through these mountains like wolves. They will conquer the city of Wu, then gallop south to the Capitol City. They will rule all of China. The Wild Horsemen will not stop until they reach the Emperor's palace!

Everyone is stunned.

MANDARIN: Oh dear.

HAN walks up to the MESSENGER.

HAN: Most important messenger?

MESSENGER: Yes?

HAN: Aren't you from the Tai Shu Monastery?

MESSENGER: Yes.

HAN: Don't the Tai Shu monks walk barefoot all the time?

MESSENGER: Of course we do.

HAN: Then why are your feet so soft and blistered?

The MESSENGER stares at HAN for a moment, then at everyone else, who are all looking at him with growing suspicion. Then, with a cruel smile, the MESSENGER throws off his monk's costume, revealing rough furs underneath. He draws two swords and holds one in each hand.

MANDARIN: Oh dear!

MESSENGER: I see the time for disguises is over.

CAPTAIN: Your magnificence, give me permission to trounce this interloper for daring to invade your imperial palace.

MANDARIN: Oh, yes, please, yes.

The CAPTAIN swaggers towards the MESSENGER and draws his own sword. With a great yell, the CAPTAIN attacks—but with a few swift moves, the MESSENGER disarms the CAPTAIN and knocks him to the ground.

The CAPTAIN rights himself and attacks again, only to be dispatched once again.

MANDARIN: (*nervously*) Captain, this is no time to be clowning around, your joke is very funny, now throw this...this....

MESSENGER: Wild Horseman.

MANDARIN: That, yes, throw him out!

The CAPTAIN attacks with a roar, but this time the MESSENGER disarms him and smacks him on the head with the flat of his own sword.

MESSENGER: Very funny indeed. Now that I have seen what comedians live in the city of Wu, I'll let my brothers know we have nothing to fear. The attack can begin at once.

The MANDARIN notices that the MESSENGER is standing on the trapdoor to the garbage chute. He shouts at the MERCHANT.

MANDARIN: Quick, press that button!

The MERCHANT presses the blue button, there is a rumble, and a plum drops on the MESSENGER's head.

No, no, the red one!

The MERCHANT presses the red button—but as the trapdoor opens, the MESSENGER deftly steps aside.

MESSENGER: Most insipid Mandarin of Wu, I have learned all your tricks. Wild Horsemen are not so easily—

HAN steps over to the MESSENGER.

HAN: Most frightening Wild Horseman?

MESSENGER: What do you want?

HAN stomps on the MESSENGER's foot. The MESSENGER howls in agony and jumps, holding his foot in his hands. He falls into the trapdoor. His howl can be heard disappearing down the long garbage chute.

MANDARIN: Oh dear. He'll be trapped in the garbage bin. That happened to me, you know, when I first—Wait, that's good! He's trapped in the garbage bin!

The MANDARIN frowns at HAN.

You should be severely punished for bringing such a dangerous person into the Imperial Court! You will be! Just as soon as I solve our—uhm—current conundrum. Sit there in the meantime.

HAN: Thank you, most benevolent Mandarin.

The MANDARIN paces fretfully.

MANDARIN: These Wild Horsemen are terrible! Nasty, ugly, most unpleasant! What can we do, what can we do—Aha! We have an army! We can fight them off!

The CAPTAIN groans as he starts to rise from the floor.

Perhaps not. Let's see—We can run away! We will all disguise ourselves as small woodland creatures, so no one will notice us.

The MANDARIN begins to imitate a small woodland creature.

MERCHANT: Ah—most glamorous and talented Mandarin—pardon my foolish question, but isn't the army supposed to protect China?

MANDARIN: Well of course.

MERCHANT: Protect it from being—invaded?

MANDARIN: Obviously!

MERCHANT: Invaded by monstrous barbarians?

MANDARIN: Who else?

MERCHANT: Barbarians like the Wild Horsemen?

MANDARIN: No—eh, sort of—well, yes.

MERCHANT: Won't the Emperor get angry if we let the Wild Horsemen into China?

MANDARIN: Nnnnn...maybe.

MERCHANT: And when the Emperor gets angry, doesn't he throw people in prison for the rest of their lives?

MANDARIN: Well, that won't do, no running away then. Hmm. Ah! We can surrender!

MERCHANT: Ah—

MANDARIN: No more advice from you. Yellow button.

HAN presses the yellow button. The mouthpiece extends.

Librarian, what happens if we surrender?

LIBRARIAN: (*off*) One moment...syrup...swallowtail...surrender! The Wild Horsemen make their prisoners eat beetles, worms, and centipedes for dinner.

The MANDARIN pulls the mouthpiece away from his mouth, but holds on to it.

MANDARIN: Oh. That sounds awful.

Everyone nods in agreement.

Well. I have a fourth plan of action.

MERCHANT: What is it, most wise Mandarin of Wu?

MANDARIN: We shall pray to the Great Cloud Dragon, the legendary patron of the city of Wu, to help us.

CAPTAIN: An excellent course of action, most intelligent Mandarin.

The MANDARIN speaks into the mouthpiece.

MANDARIN: I hereby decree: The entire city of Wu must stop what they are doing, no matter how important, and pray to the Great Cloud Dragon. Even I shall pray to the Great Cloud Dragon. Everyone will pray to the Great Cloud Dragon. Everyone—

He releases the mouthpiece, which retracts.

—everyone except you.

He points to HAN, who jumps in fright.

HAN: Me?

MANDARIN: You sweep the city gates, do you not?

HAN: Yes, but I don't mind praying, I'll be happy to pray.

MANDARIN: No. You must watch for the Great Cloud Dragon. The Great Cloud Dragon will come to our gates and you must bring him to me at once. Fulfill this duty, and your previous crimes shall be forgiven. Is that understood?

HAN: Thank you, most magnificent Mandarin, for this important task.

MANDARIN: Now everyone pray! Very loudly! The Great Cloud Dragon must hear us! Oh Great Cloud Dragon! Come and save the city of Wu!

MANDARIN/CAPTAIN/MERCHANT: Oh Great Cloud Dragon! Come and save the city of Wu! Oh Great—

They exit. HAN looks after them for a moment, anxious with his new sense of responsibility, then runs towards his home.

HAN: Ping! Ping!

HAN runs through the town, which whirls around him, with all the Towspeople of Wu crying out:

TOWNSPEOPLE: Oh Great Cloud Dragon! Come and save the city of Wu! Oh Great Cloud Dragon! Come and save the city of Wu! Oh Great Cloud Dragon!

HAN arrives at his hut and rushes in to find PING.

HAN: Ping! Where are you? Ping?

He runs back to the gate, where he finds PING dragging the broom around in an attempt to sweep. The prayers of the city can be heard in the background.

Oh, Ping!

He embraces PING, who squeals in happiness.

I have just become very important, and I wish I wasn't important at all.

He leaps up, grabs the broom, and begins sweeping.

I have to work very very hard, because a very very important person is coming. The Great Cloud Dragon is coming!

The HERMIT emerges from her cave. PING squeals to draw attention to the HERMIT, but HAN pays no attention.

Look at all the dirt that's been kicked up while I've been gone! The gate must be as clean as possible! Our guest will be even more elegant than the Mandarin!

HERMIT: You there.

HAN whirls around, frightened, then relaxes when he sees it's just the HERMIT.

Why is this city still here? Didn't I tell you to get rid of it? This city is spoiling my appetite!

HAN: I can't talk to you now! Wu is in terrible danger!

HERMIT: Indeed it is. If you don't take it somewhere else, I'll have to get rid of it myself.

HAN: No! The Wild Horsemen are coming!

HERMIT: The who?

HAN: Horrible barbarians! I saw one myself, up close, they're cruel and they're vicious! They will kill us all!

HERMIT: Hmm, that will help. Then I just have to knock over all the buildings.

HAN: You should pray! The Mandarin has ordered that everyone must pray!

HERMIT: Pray? Who are you praying to?

HAN: To the Great Cloud Dragon! Listen! Everyone in the city is begging the Great Cloud Dragon to save us!

The HERMIT listens. The prayers of the Townspeople can be heard.

HERMIT: Hmm.

The HERMIT brushes some dust from her clothes.

Then you had better take me to see your Mandarin.

HAN: Take you? But the Mandarin is busy praying! He doesn't have time to see crazy people!

HERMIT: But I'm the one he's praying to.

HAN: What?!

HERMIT: I am the Great Cloud Dragon.

HAN stares dumbfounded at the HERMIT as the lights go down.

End of Act 1.