

FOUR PANEL SCREEN: A CHINESE TALE PAINTED IN THE
ANCIENT MANNER

THE PANEL OF BURNING BOOKS

Black dog raises his leg
and pisses on my library.
Huwang Chow burns all my books,
every volume to the flames, eaten.
They did not distinguish between the two translations.
They burned Kung Fu Tzu and Lao Tzu alike.
The fire roared for hours
in the clear winter afternoon.
They roasted words and covers alike.
All illustrations were destroyed.
When the people who were not men came,
the carts were loaded with all the books,
and they were carried down to the river banks
to be burned in the ditches
filled with winter straw.
Oxen pulled the carts when the books were burned.
Their tails hung down in the ice slush
melted by the flames.
I was only ten, but my books were also burned.
The ones painted by Li Fu Tza were also burned.
The black ribbons of the burned leaves
flew through the air like a flock of silent crows.
The soldiers who did the burning
never read books, and their armor was well polished.
There is no blame. Their duty was to burn books.
The burning books also filled the night with embers
of poets and scientists until an hour before dawn.
Nearby marsh birds were killed by the smoke,
and the ground was black until spring.

INCANTATION FOR A WINTER JOURNEY

Smoke rises from the city which has been raped
and plundered by hordes of men with unusual thoughts.
The inhabitants are coughing up reptiles, broken teeth,
and images fit for unholy celebrations.
Careless hands throw everything into carts
with high wooden sides. Yesterday's clothing is in a heap
on the top, robes and fine blankets
cover delicate chairs and tables and the toys of
the children.

Before I am pulled from my house,
I scrape a quick message on the frost of the window.
Perhaps it will reappear again before spring.
We take a last look at the garden as we pass.
The plum trees which we enjoyed last summer
now rasp upon the ground, con sordino,
like mice running over straw mats.
The horse sleds are being loaded also.
Everything excess is thrown into a ditch.
The sun is gone for good, and one who seems to be a
leader
is pointing with a long fingernail.
A red-faced man with a beard blows a trumpet
for a joke as we depart.

About three miles out, at the summer cottage of Li Wu,
the runners get stuck on a tree branch.
Someone shouts for an ax, and it is as we fear.
A rope is dragging by the side of my sleigh,
and I watch it for hours like a baby
looking at a toy he doesn't understand.

Food is brought up for the drivers.
They wash it down with tea made from melted snow.
We get nothing, of course, and the fires are kicked out.
There is no conversation on the trail,
only the panting of the horses.
I have memories of birds; I recall names stupidly
and lines I have written in notebooks years ago
behind painted screens.

I feel a little cold coming on.
There was some chill when they pounded the snow into
my mouth,
but I am still able to breathe from my nostrils.

A FABLE OF REMOVING HANDS AND HEADS

The city people were easy to move or remove. The men
hung their heads and lowed like cattle as our perfect
blades drank up their bones. We are not barbarians.
We understood the cruel comments made by some of the
angry women. The trilling, refined tongues were known
to us from intercourse with women of the northern
provinces. We are not without refinement and culture.
No one was made to suffer a long time. In the sight
of the captains, death was winnowing swift and performed
with precision. We only cut off the hands of those
women who had done terrible things to our foot soldiers,
and then we bound the stumps with rice paper after a
moment in a healing fire. It is true that books were
burned, but is it not also true that it was the books

that made the city weak at the end? The thoughts they contained would have made even Kwang Lei blush with shame.

The women and children we saved and carried in comfort on sleds to our homeland. We bore them to us like treasures to be cherished and protected. Only the dangerous or foolish were dispatched beside the road. Our slaves for the most part come to love us in time. I have seen it happen before. Some of the women will be taken as wives into the tents of chiefs -- could their lives in the city with walls have been so very pleasing?

The Khan's all together have been much maligned by effete poets and scholars. My father and grandfather were from the line of Chow, and never were rituals or the gods profaned by their words or actions, neither in battle, nor before the hearth fires of Lwoun.

PONIES ONLY WALKING -- CHINESE SURVIVOR EPILOGUE

Shaggy Tartar ponies are still coming through the snow and a low morning mist to where I am hunched, sitting on the ground before my early fire. Everything remains white, glowing sheets, rolling, knife cutting, smothering, a quilt of dragon breath that hugs me to death like lover Li.

At first, I could only hear them in the cold dawn, far away across the steppe. Then, suddenly, the heads of the ponies broke through, and soon the first one was beside me, snorting and puffing rings of red smoke.

The owners of the ponies had obviously been killed in a battle on the previous day, for the saddles and bridles were those of warriors, and the manes and coats of the ponies were matted and stained with blood. One animal in particular was most pathetic in appearance since there was a barbed arrow through a front fetlock, and it was a wonder that he was able to keep up with the others at all.

I have been here for several days now, and still the ponies march slowly through my camp. I hardly notice them at all anymore. There is a blanket around my shoulders against a rising wind, and I am alone melting snow over my fire for another cup of tea. I am also beginning to fear the wonderfully accurate portrait of my face painted in the snow a few feet from where I am permanently crouched.

-- David A. Adams

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