

Dream Cleansers, from *Tangut Inn*

Luo Yijun

Translation by Pingta Ku

This seems to be supported by information that the Khazar envoy ended his life at the court of some caliph by turning his soul inside out and slipping it on like an inverted glove. His torn skin, tanned and bound like a big atlas, held a place of honor in the caliph's palace in Samarra. According to a second group of sources, the envoy had many a nasty moment. First, while still in Constantinople, he had to let his hand be cut off, because an influential man at the Greek court had paid in solid gold for the second large Khazar year, written on the envoy's left palm. A third group of sources. . . He lived—The Khazar Dictionary tells us—like a living encyclopaedia of the Khazars, on money earned by standing quietly through the long nights. He would keep vigil, his gaze fixed on the Bosphorus' silver treetops, which resembled puffs of smoke. While he stood, Greek and other scribes would copy the Khazar history from his back and thighs into their books. It is said that . . . the letters of the Khazar alphabet derived their names from foods, the numbers from the names of the seven types of salt the Khazars differentiated. One of his sayings has been preserved. It reads: "If the Kahzars did better in Itil they would do better in Constantinople too." Generally speaking, he said many things that were contrary to what was written on his skin.

—Milorad Pavic, Dictionary of the Khazars

Editor's Note: *Xixia luguan* (*Tangut Inn*), a two-volume novel by Taiwanese writer Luo Yijun (a.k.a. Lo Yichun), was first published in 2008 by INK Publishing, Taipei. Scholar-translator Pingta Ku's English translation of the first volume of the novel garnered him the "PEN Presents" translation award given by English PEN. The journal thanks the translator for granting us permission to publish excerpts from the chapter "Dream Cleansers." All ellipses are from the original.

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Half a century later, I can still recite by heart this passage from the tediously obscure storybook that haunted my childhood, probably because my youthful ignorance and melancholic premonition found an echo in the following lines that envision a solitary immensity: “He lived like a living encyclopaedia of the Khazars. . . . He would keep vigil, his gaze fixed on the Bosphorus’ silver treetops, which resembled puffs of smoke.” I seemed to see myself in *him*.

Dad might have wilfully read his own life, or even Grandpa’s, into that Khazar story. On those hazy, oneiric nights, he would lean towards a dim spark of candlelight, gently tossed Grandpa’s fat ashen corpse inside the square coffin, and tattooed on his sagging skin the diasporic memoirs of “our tribe” — ever-vanishing, folded into shadows, interwoven with lies and orphans’ exaggerated sorrow. As I matured and became able to composedly isolate “my own memories” from *spiritus mundi*, I realized that my childhood peers read nothing but silly stories about foxes, bears, deers, the Sleeping Beauty and the Swan Prince, or “men are born with benevolence,” or “thus spoke Confucius: ‘restrain thyself and return to proprieties’”, et cetera. Nobody knew that Dad had forced me, with ferocious punishment, to memorize an “encyclopaedia” in its entirety. He mousetrapped my fingers, dripped scorching candle wax on my feet, whipped my buttocks till they ripped, and seated me through freezing nights on a cold stool in his study . . . in the hope that I would absorb a thick novel which—I was to realize many years later—hatches an unknown foreigner’s absurd fantasy of “a nonexistent kingdom.” Did Dad, upon turning his back on the hopeless task of tattooing dead-daddy-turned-parchment-scroll, catch sight of me and see my potential to be his “envoy”? But to whom should I pass his message? To his offspring in a futuristic world? And what message should I pass? *Gone in a Puff: The Two-Century-Old Kingdom*, the nobody-gives-a-damn-about novel in *constipated* Tangut script that exhausted the remains of his reclusive life? A clique of obscure scholars—who reportedly possess the residues of Dad’s draft—assert that the novel has *farthing* to do with the kingdom of the ghostly Tangut nomads over the vast land of Hetao in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A few decoded fragments of plot, garments, culinary culture, and conversations indicate that the novel should’ve been retitled *Gone in a Puff: Zhiyuan the Protected Cruiser*. They swear it is a novel about a phantom fleet.

As for the Tangut Kingdom, accumulating evidence suggests that Dad, in the hope of enfleshing “the *other* kingdom” in some odd space-time, had forged and erroneously quoted ethnographic treatises on irrelevant northern nomads, only to emulate a *tableau vivant* where his fabricated, faceless characters were painfully deprived of the memories of their forefathers and, in the fear of genocide, forced their saddle horses to gallop through sandstorms, mirages, and weed-infested riverbeds

beneath the enormous sky bathed in northern lights. For instance, there are vivid depictions of the grave goods unearthed from Tangut tombs: leathers, furs, grainy tweeds, ceramic spindle whorls, dyed textiles and blankets, or extravagant *traded* (I've almost absentmindedly written a wrong word: *imported*. *Port*? In that land of drought where the ocean is beyond imaginable?) treasures in aristocrats' coffins, such as wools of various colors, satins, damask or finely embroidered fabrics. He mentioned, in the battle scenes, that joints made of bones or horns maximized the resilience and flexibility of their composite bows, each of which was 1.5 meters tall and relentlessly powerful. Their arrows had heads made from bone or iron; bronze arrowheads were rare. Most of the iron or bronze arrowheads were triangular and spined. There were also so-called "whistling arrows"—whose heads enwrapped a tiny skeleton bead with drilled holes that created frightening whiz. Bow holsters were carried on left shoulders and quivers were sewn to right-arm sleeves.

Some other passages depict the making of snaffle bits, livestock like horses, cows, sheep or dogs, or such rare stallions as jennets, juetis, taotus, dianxis . . . or such crops and agricultural machinery as iron blades, iron sickles, stonemills, and cellars for crop preservation. Funerals, epidemics, and the heating system of flue pipes and stoves are mentioned as well. There are also passages on their patriarchal caste system of "*levirate marriage*" . . .

In a nutshell, Dad's novel wishes to transform that facsimile world into *le monde vivant*, yet, due to his poor execution, it strikes readers as an amateurish ashen-toned, shot-on-DV documentary "about the excavation of Pompeii." It reminds us of a kingdom that fell untimely because of a tiny glitch: when its full-blown civilization was flaunting elaborate etiquette and expanding territory, some unexpected catastrophe (the plague? enemies from the North? volcanic ash? the emperor's corrupted decision?) eradicated the entire people. Indeed, Dad's novel captures the kingdom before it fell, spinning like a spindle to weave prophecy, witchcraft, magic, shivers before massacres, feigned surrender, perverse orgies, and other spectacles into its mystic textual universe.

I inherited from Dad a copy of his manuscript in classical Chinese; better yet, it's not part of the novel. I presented this firsthand material in a private seminar in defense of Dad's underrated novel and its magical artistry, only to attract ridicule—"foolish nonsense"—from an austere white-headed scholar of Dad's generation (who spoke with a thick southern accent and reportedly wrote a splendid thesis novel based on secret materials to reveal the resemblance between the archaic map of Taiwan—long before its modern transformation into a supine spoon—and a standing juvenile salamander). He pointed out that the "manuscript" in my possession was nothing but fragmented records of the Tanguts from *History*

of Mongolia, Vol. III: Biographic Sketches of Genghis Khan, Erdeniin Tobchi: Mongolian Chronicle, History of Yuan, Vol. I: Annals of Genghis Khan, and History of Mongolia: Biography of Tulun:

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LXXI. The kalender æra of dīng-hài, the eighteenth day of March. While the legions were sente to the land of Tangut, they befieg'd the land of Khangai. Chinggis Qahan sente the Diuine Engin Diuifion to iffue his decree: "Within the feige are Qo'ai-maral and Bôrte-chino, doe-not kille the paire. There is a black figure on a greene horfe, who moſte be feized aliue to His Maieſtie." Therefor Qo'ai-maral and Bôrte-chino were releaſed according to the decree, and to the Qahan was the black man taken. The Qahan aſkt: "Who art thou? Wherefor come thou here?" Hee answered: "I am the faithfull ſeruant of Shidurqu Qahan, and Shidurqu Qahan ſente me to ſpie." The Qahan iffued his decree: "A true hero hee is." Therefor hee was not killed. And the Qahan aſkt: "They ſayde thy Qahan is a 'Xubilgan,' how tranſformeth hee?" And hee answered: "Our Qahan becometh a black ſerpent in the morning, and becometh a bright tigre at nonne, and becometh a childe at night; His Maieſtie wilt not be ſieſed."

...

LXXVII. The lunar month of Iune, the Tangut King Li Xian ſurrendered, and Tuluncherbi was ſente to pacifie and recrute him. Chinggis Qahan dide by the Xi Riuer in the Countie of Qingſhui.

LXXVIII. The kalender æra of dīng-hài, the legions conquerede the prefecture of Iiſhi and ſieſed the city. The prefecture of Hé was beſieged and fortie enemies were beheaded. Šilimji was taken and Longde was conquerede and hundreds were beheaded. The legions attackt Gongchang and camped in the prefecture of Qin.

LXXIX. The legions cloſed in on the City of Eri-qaya. By time Li Dewang had demijed the crowne to his ſonne Li Xian, who coniectured that the kingdome was doomed and ſente his enuoy to capitulate. It ſayde hee durſt not expect to be taken as the ſonne of the Qahan. The legions were then in Qingſhui. The Qahan was not well and feigned his conſent.

LXXX. The legions entred the land of Tangut, and threefold beſieged the City of Ouraca. A black old woman with witchcraft weaued a greene flagge on the parapet and killed two teams of geldings with ſubduing black magick. Thus Baghatur

apprised the Qahan: "My Lord, our geldings art dead, and Qasar shall go to shoot her." The Qahan consented and gave Qasar his spare yellow horse and asked him to shoot her. Qasar shot the old woman in the knee, and she he was killed. Shidurqu Qahan became a serpent, and Chinggis Qahan became a garuda, the king of all birds; Shidurqu then became a tiger, and the Qahan became a lion, the king of all beasts; Shidurqu then became a child, and the Qahan became the Jade God; Shidurqu was outdone and sieged. Shidurqu sayde: "If I am killed, thou wilt be harmed; if not, thine offspring wilt be." The Qahan sayde: "Fain would I harm me selfe to save my offspring." Neyther arrows nor blades could kill him. Shidurqu sayde: "Thou canest not harm me with sharpe weapons. I wilt be killed by nothing except the Misfari bodkin in my boots." The bodkin was sought, and againe Shidurqu sayde: "If milke ouseth out of my body, thou wilt be harmed; blood, thine offspring. And my Gurbeljin gowa hadon, if thou take her, thou shalt know her." Therefor hee was beheaded by the Misfari bodkin. Milke oufed out of his body. The Qahan tooke Gurbeljin gowa hadon and conquerede Minyak. The Tangut people were many. The Qahan desired to spend the sommer on the south slope of the Mountaine of Altai and by the riuer of Qara.

Gurbeljin gowa hadon, the quene of Shidurqu, amazed all with her diuine bewtie. Gurbeljin gowa hadon sayde: "My bewtie hath been dusted by thine armies. If I bathe in the riuer, my bewtie wilt be refored." Therefor the Qahan asked her to bathe in the riuer. To the riuer of Qara went Gurbeljin gowa hadon, and a fowl fostered by her father houred ouer her. She sieged the fowl and sayde to her seruants: "I feel shamefull to bathe in front of thee, and thou shalt let me bathe by me selfe." Thus she went and wrote: "I wilt droune me selfe in the riuer of Qara. Do-not seeke my corpe down the streame. Thou shalt goe vp the streame." She bound the letter to the head of the fowl and sente it back. She returned from the riuer, and her bewtie was truelie restored. That night the Qahan knew her and his loins were harmed. Whilst the Qahan was not well, Gurbeljin gowa hadon fledde and droune her selfe in the riuer of Qara. The riuer was named Hadon-müren hereafter. Her father receiued the letter and came to seeke her corpe, but found nothing except a socke sewed with pearles. Her father asked all to spray a handfull of dirt and named the place Temürulqu.

LXXXI. Autumne, the lunar month of Iulie, in the yeare of rên-wǔ, the Qahan was not well. In the yeare of jǐ-chǒu, the Qahan dide at his sommer palace by the riuer of Kerülen. . . .

Later, the old scholar sent someone to hand me a set of dog-eared ancient volumes entitled *Collected Historical Documents of Tangut and Western Xia* (edited by

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a guy yclept Hán Yinshèng); the stinky pages smelled like a mixture of decayed pulp, sewage, stench sugar-apples and soured semen. . . . Unbelievably unpleasant. I searched for the pages he'd marked and found passages identical with Dad's manuscript. I also discovered that Dad's transcription discontinued at entry #81 in the "compiled chronology" (AD 1224-1227): Genghis Khan ascended to heaven while his legions were besieging Dörmegei. The death of Genghis Khan was depicted in various forms:

LXXXII. Autumne, the lunar month of Iulie, in the yeare of rén-wǔ, the Qahan was not well. In the yeare of jǐ-chǒu, the Qahan dide in Dörmegei. It was in the thirde yeare of the raigne of the Emperor Lizong of Song.

Ere the Qahan rose to heauen, he issued his decree: "Thou art in the land of thine enemies, and the defeated Xia King hath not turned himselfe in. Do-not enforme the enemies of my death, and kille the King of Minyak when hee cometh." The Qahan spit his words and dide. Hee ruled for twenty-two yeares and ascended into heauen after seuen decades and one yeare in the human world. All Mongol noyans concealed the death of the Qahan. The Xia King Li Xian soon came to haue an audience with the Qahan, and they kept him outside the temple on the pretext that the Qahan was not well. Three days later, Tuluncherbi killed him according to the decree of the late Qahan. The Tanguts were rootede out and the Westerne Xia was eradicated.

LXXXIII. Xian sente his enuoyes and requested to haue an audience with the Qahan on the pretext of giuing tribute and mouing his people to a new land. The Qahan was very sick but granted him permission. Tuluncherbi was sente to pacifie the Tangut armies and people. The Xia King went to Dörmegei to giue tribute. Firft among them were golden Buddhas; there were also bowls and vessels of gold and filuer, nine squared of each; boys and girls, nine squared of each; and geldings and camels, nine squared of each. By the time the Qahan had ascended into heauen, but all Mongol noyans concealed the death of the Qahan, and led Xian to the outside of the temple on the pretext that the Qahan was not well. Three days later, Tuluncherbi killed the Xia King according to the decree of the late Qahan and shed the blood of the Tanguts. All mongols were afkt to say ere dyning: "Hail to the doom of Tangut." Thus the beheft of Chinggis Qahan was fulfilled. Tuluncherbi was awarded with the vessels left in the palace of the Xia King, and he thought that noyans were many.

LXXXIV. The Xia King Li Xian surrendered and was siefed. The Xia was exterminated.

LXXXV. *The yeare of Swine, the fifteenth day of August, the Qahan dide.*

LXXXVI. *The kalender æra of dīng-hài, the legions destroyed Tangut and returned.*

A close-up from multiple angles. The formation of a bizarre effect. As if the final hours of these two emperors had been cross-recorded by a group of CCTVs that rotated, rewound, froze, and zoomed in. Some say such high-tech surveillance pervaded back in Dad's old days—in convenience stores, on utility poles, in VHS stores, or in banks. There was even a school of novel-writing known as "CCTV-Realism." I surmise that this novel entitled *Collected Historical Documents of Tangut and Western Xia* is a hybrid of the once fashionable "Pseudo-Historicism," "Pseudo-Chroniclism" and "CCTV-Realism." A pair of machine eyes look at the death of Genghis Khan and of Li Xian, a.k.a. Shidurqu. Like two poker-faced gamblers sitting at the opposite ends of a long table, they wait for each other's bid. It's all about the arts of illusion and treachery: they stand humbly with hands down and call each other "father." Shidurqu "presented Chinggis Qahan with a set of gifts: first among them were golden Buddhas. They also included bowls and vessels of gold and silver, nine squared of each; boys and girls, nine squared of each; and geldings and camels, nine squared of each." Genghis Khan's face and expression remained off-frame, his head behind the shadow of draperies and the glowing dust pouring down from the caisson. You can't see those frozen instants of lost time and raw emotions: anger, heartbreak, jocularly, painful remorse, or forgiveness. The duo were just sitting there. They led him to walk past legions of warriors, whose clanking armors and scratching spurs almost paralysed his urinary bladder; they left him in the shadow of the temple and asked him to salute as a courtier. He sniffed at the pungent rancidity of a bloated goat carcass that wafted out from the temple and overpowered the fragrance of sandalwood. Back then he had already known that the entire people—including him—would be bathed in blood and then wiped out. Genocide. His mind went blank and his memory became barren. The people known as the "Tanguts" would no longer inhabit this world. Gone in a puff. Their nomadic kingdom not merely invented its own script and kilns but also survived massacres and political turmoil; its territory pulsed like a breathing lung and its supply routes throbbed like arteries. Like dandyish fickle ladies shutting to and fro in the midst of the northwestern mirages of sand dunes and black waters, his forefathers played chess against the Northern Song to encroach upon the fortified prefectures of Líng, Yín and Xia, in an alternating cycle of feigned truce and full-throttle attacks. He knew too well the capricious nature of his people, which was manifest in the ambivalent faces of their crouching monolithic female totems with massive

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breasts. The entire people flaunted flamboyance against an existential angst, and manipulated their more masculine neighbors—the Mongols, the Khitans, the Jurchens and the Song—with perseverance, slyness, cruelty and determination. He had witnessed too many massacres wherein 200,000 or even 300,000 souls were slain. Piles of corpses blocked the flow of Fairwater, and, when winter came, a thin layer of wobbling, translucent jelly of human fat and blood covered up the immense Yellow River. But *total eradication* was beyond the border of his imagination—what happened? How and when did things go wrong? Shidurqu bounced up and became a black serpent beneath the starry sky, only to see Genghis Khan’s human face mutating into the protruding beak of a bird of prey and his shoulders growing Garuda’s feathers. When celestial bodies were orbiting the scorching white heat of the sun, a colorful tiger sprung out of the cleft forehead of his father, only to see Genghis Khan becoming a gigantic snow-white lion. The sun was now sinking into the scarlet sky, and his father, giggling, became a seated child in silver bracelets, anklets, and vermilion bodice on a sand dune, only to see Genghis Khan wiping out his face and transforming into the golden-haloed Jade Emperor, escorted by immortals and bodhisattvas. So, that was it? *Checkmate*? He thought it was nothing but a naughty dream of metamorphosis that his forefathers dreamt in their nomadic solitude. But beyond the dreamscape the Mongol troopers were sabotaging their crossbow-proof rammed-earth walls with pure masculinity and the indisputable laws of the empire. Their mausoleums of domed heaven and square earth, lying slightly west of due north and guarded by seven Buddharupas, suffered bloody laparotomies. Tangut warriors with *tufa* heads fled the great steppes like muted ravens, only to be chased and slashed by playful Mongol troopers with crossbows and scimitars in a brutal hunting game.

I suddenly think of another chapter of the bizarre book that Dad forced me to memorize:

An angel once came to the kaghan in a dream and told him, “The Lord is not pleased by your deeds, but is by your intentions.” He immediately summoned one of the most prominent Khazar priests from the sect of dream hunters and asked him to explain what the dream meant. The hunter laughed and told the kaghan: “God knows nothing of you; he sees not your intentions, or your thoughts, or your deeds. The fact that an angel appeared and rambled on in your dream only means that it had nowhere else to spend the night and that it was probably raining outside. If it did not stay long, that is probably because your dream had a bad stench. Wash your dreams next time. . . .” Upon hearing these words, the kaghan became enraged and summoned foreigners to interpret his dream. “Yes, human dreams have a dreadful odor” was the

Khazar envoy's comment on this story. He passed away, because his skin inscribed with the Khazar history began to itch terribly. The itch was unbearable, and it was with relief that he died, glad to be finally cleansed of history.

Aye, fair enough, cleanse your dream. An angel rambled in your dream simply because it was raining outside. But your dream stank, and thousands of maggots squirmed in and off the skull wrapped in maroon carcass. Your intestines secreted the bad stench of fermented enzyme because you'd nibbled too much lamb and no veggie. The Tangut boy in your dream kept digging holes and burying faeces over the immense desert of brown, barren sands. Afterwards you realized that he wasn't just burying his own gamey faeces, but paranoiacally experimenting with various methods of burying corpses over that empty, scentless surface. His methods were insanely creative, perfectly feasible and astonishingly artful. Reluctant to see his dreamscape tarnished by a growing pile of corpses, he studied the process of mummy-making. He resorted to the manifest omens on wormwood-smoked mutton femurs to calculate the distance between each corpse pit. He even underwent the same paranoid fuss as his forefather Li Jiqian once had, so as to protect the *fengshui* of his ancestral tombs from being sabotaged by the malicious Song people: *"To bury his forefathers in the Gorge of Red Stone, hee diuerted the riuer towards the North and cheffeled a hole in the rock. Once the work had been done, hee channeled the riuer back to ouerwhelme the buriall-place, and thus no one could find it."* He even peopled the arid yellowland immune to fog and frost with a clique of minions who, in his fantasy, were the kinsmen of the dead. They built, on the very route of the funeral procession, a cabin and wrapped it in golden satin. As the coffin passed by the cabin, the minions inside (subjected to his priesthood) would offer the dead wine, meat and some other food, so that the dead would find after-life as habitable as the living world. He asked those minions to lay the dead in a wooden casket, whose planks were a handbreadth thick and securely sealed. The casket featured illustration and abounded in pungent camphor, the dead inside covered by a fabulous piece of gilt silk. He would serve as an astrologist and choose the best hour for the dead to be moved to the mortuary, where it might stay for up to six months. They would stuff the cabin with ready-made paper dolls, paper horses, paper camels and ghost money; then he would command those snivelling mourners to break walls and flee the cabin. Finally, they would stack up firewood and incinerate "the cabin of the dead."

In the empty dreamscape, he, often in solitude, gazed at the distant horizon ablaze with rouged vermilion.

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