

Borderland Fiction: The Mongol Would-be Self-immolator

By Guo Xuebo, translated and introduced by Bruce Humes



Author Guo Xuebo, a Mongol who grew up speaking the language of his people in the Horchin Grasslands of Inner Mongolia where the novel is set.

The all-pervasive PR blitz surrounding China’s strategic campaign to resurrect and expand ancient Eurasian trade routes — by land and sea — known as “One Belt, One Road,” is a hot topic among eager foreign businesspeople, as well as those who view it with a more sceptical eye, such as diplomats, military strategists and China watchers worldwide.

The definition of “silk road” is broad, including both the original land-based caravan routes from Xi’an through Central and West Asia, the Middle East and Europe, as well as the so-called Maritime Silk Road that linked the South China Sea, South Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

Less high profile are cultural components in this strategic campaign. Take the “Silk Road Fragrant Books Project” (丝路书香工程), for instance, a well-funded global publishing

initiative. Given the stamp of approval by China’s Ministry of Propaganda, it is designed to stimulate the translation and publication of literary, historical and cultural works that are grounded in the cultures of peoples along the Silk Road of yore. The plan for 2014-20 includes translation subsidies, translations between Chinese and foreign tongues, international exhibitions, and a database of Silk Road publications.

While scholars and translators specializing in Central Asia are pleased, writers belonging to northwest China’s non-Han ethnic groups, such as Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Sibe and Mongols, also stand to benefit. The “export” of their writing, including contemporary ethnic-themed fiction, is now also eligible for translation grants — specifically targeting minority writers (当代少数民族文学作品对外翻译资助) — via the China Writers Association.

The new “Kaleidoscope Series of China’s Ethnic Writers,” from China Translation & Publishing House, consists of poetry, novels and short story collections by a dozen or so non-Han writers, several of whose peoples have historically straddled China’s northern borders. Thanks to various grants, some of their novels are scheduled for publication in English in 2018, including two set in Xinjiang by Uyghur authors, *Confessions of a Jade Lord* (Alat Asem) and *One Hundred Year Bloodline* (Patigül), and a Mongolian thriller, *Manba Rasang* (Ayunga, Mongol).

Guidelines for censorship in the Xi Jinping Era have tightened considerably for all, be they bloggers, reporters or novelists, but for minority authors who wish to highlight the

culture or challenges facing non-Han peoples within today's PRC, the obstacles to publication and the list of "unmentionables" is even longer. Aside from a shortage of translators working from indigenous languages into Mandarin or foreign languages, there is also the subtle impact of state- and self-censorship that ensures certain "ethnic realities" are rarely depicted, be it in a magazine, book or online, in reportage or even fictional form. A Uyghur businessman who tries to book a room in Shanghai may be informed the hotel is full, or face interrogation from a policeman; a community of Mongolian herders may be conveniently classified as "ecological migrants" (生态移民), given negligible compensation and forced to relocate, in order to make way for a profitable mining project or power plant; and a rural Tibetan dweller may be refused entry to Lhasa, home to innumerable sites sacred to indigenous Buddhists, because he lacks a travel permit to enter the administrative capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

Such real-life phenomena are contentious and perceived by the authorities as likely to breed "inter-ethnic" discontent, and when mentioned in literary works or reportage are heavily redacted or simply not published. Very occasionally, however, a minority author — as in the excerpt below — manages to skirt the censors and turn the spotlight on burning issues.



***Mongoliya* by Guo Xuebo. Cover of the novel**

Set in China's 21st-century Inner Mongolia, *Mongoliya* (蒙古里亞) is a semi-autobiographical tale by Guo Xuebo (郭雪波), a Mongol who grew up speaking the language of his people. It comprises three distinct but intertwined narratives: a spiritual journey, in which the author — ostensibly the narrator — seeks his Shamanic roots, long obscured in post-1949, officially atheist China; vignettes from the Mongolian adventures of Henning Haslund-Christensen, born to a Danish missionary family in 1896 and real-life author of the anthropological masterpiece *Men and Gods in Mongolia*; and the tribulations of Teelee Yesu, a modern-day fictional Mongol herdsman, considered by many to be the village idiot, whose very survival is threatened by

desertification and coal mine truckers running roughshod over his tiny plot of land.

The excerpt that follows craftily satirizes what might be dubbed “wéiwěn paranoia,” the mania around implementing the central government’s “stability maintenance” policy (维稳), and unexpectedly manages to touch on two taboo topics: the exploitation of traditional Mongolian pasture lands by ruthless coal mining firms, and self-immolation, a horrific yet galvanizing form of protest heretofore largely limited to regions inhabited by Tibetans.

The Mongol Would-be Self-Immolator

Excerpted from Chapter 4 of *Mongoliya*,

a novel by Guo Xuebo

《蒙古里亚》郭雪波 著

Translated from the Chinese by Bruce Humes

When I arrived at the police station to visit the prisoner, Teelee Yesu was fast asleep in the Detention Center. I could hear his thunderous snoring from afar.

The station was located on the north side of the town in a small one-story courtyard with a single entrance. Signs hung from each of the department offices, and everything was bright and clean. The Detention Center was in the yard out back where someone was standing guard. That rattling wheeze carried through to the front courtyard.

“You’re awfully easy on your detainee,” I said to the policeman, Little Li. “Snoring like that must impact your work.”

“That depends on who’s doing the snoring.”

That struck me as odd. “You mean snoring depends on class background?”

“Of course. Yesu could bring the sky down and it wouldn’t matter. But anyone else... so much as a hum could get them in trouble.”

“Huh? Why does he get special treatment?” I was even more puzzled.

“Ha Center says Teelee Yesu’s a celebrity now. We have to look after him.”

Little Li’s reference to Chief Hadaa as ‘Ha Center’ is the current terminology in official circles. The ‘Director’ or ‘Chief’ title is dropped, leaving just the cadre’s surname and name of the administrative unit, i.e., Mao Bureau, Gou Department, Ji Section, Ya Division, Pu Office, and so on.

“A ‘celebrity’? How’s that?”

“Well Mr. Guo, I think you’d better ask him yourself,” he said, with no more than a smile.

Even the clinking and clanking as the cell door was unlocked didn’t awaken Teelee Yesu. Sprawled on a no-frills wooden bed, he was snoring like rolling thunder and his cheeks shuddered in unison. The past three days in jail had left the fellow dead tired, explained Little Li. He started shaking him, and eventually got him to come around. “Hey, wake up, fellah. Look who’s come to see you!” shouted Little Li.

Yesu rubbed his eyes, sat up and stared vacantly. When he recognized me, he threw himself at me and begged tearfully, “Brother, are you here to take me home? Have a word with Chief Ha. Let me go home. I can’t take it anymore!”

“What, did they beat you?” I placed the roast chicken and meat buns I’d brought in front of him, but they didn’t arouse his interest one bit. His eyes bloodshot, he pleaded with me to get him out of there.

“Beatings, no. But I can’t stand how they’re harassing me! Just ask Little Li!” moaned Yesu,

gesturing at the policeman.

“These last three days he’s had quite a few visitors,” said Little Li, chuckling oddly.

Baffled, I raised my voice. “What the devil is this all about?”

Stammering at first, Yesu began to tell his tale. Little Li occasionally added a sentence or two.

Teelee Yesu really had got himself into a mess. As messes go, it was a mighty big one; at the very least, it wasn’t small. From ancient times down to our day — and particularly since the establishment of the New China in 1949 — he was the very first member of Hure Banner to ever try to “self-immolate.” When this news got out, it caused an uproar. The first to come running were the ever-sensitive journalists. Local newspapers and TV stations had finally happened upon a big news item! Even better that it involved Huolun Coal Mine, already the object of boiling-hot public resentment here in Inner Mongolia. The media saw it as a precious gift they could use to sermonize. Their intent was good, and their headlines were fresh:

*Herder Teelee Yesu Shoulders
Three Dead Sheep,*

*Demands Justice From Atop
Huolun Mine HQ*

*First-ever Hure Bannerman
Threatens to Self-immolate,*

All for Three Head of Sheep!

Just to Raise Gee Dee Pee,

*Must We Mine Coal and Destroy
Our Grasslands?*



Open-cast mine in Inner Mongolia

Interviews aren’t normally permitted during detention. But thanks to their extensive *guanxi*, resourceful reporters were able to get permission slips from the higher-ups that prised open the jail door. These daytime waves of reporters weren’t too hard to deal with: you just call a spade a spade, and describe the affair factually as it occurred. Then he’d emphasize that he was only bluffing. He wasn’t really going to light himself on fire; actually, that was water he’d put in the plastic bucket.

“Water?!” That’s when the reporter’s eyeballs would just about pop out. But this became an intriguing news angle, too: The herder had brought a bucket of water to ignite himself — Yesu had played quite the joke indeed!

But what made Yesu’s head ache and tormented him until he was indescribably miserable were the three successive nightly interrogations; what they called “investigation and clarification” sessions.

Since arriving he’d already hosted three batches of Banner leaders, plus two teams of Public Security honchos. And all of it after night’s curtain had fallen. They arrived without fanfare, slipping quietly in and quietly out.

The leader who came the first night was Yang Baruun, the Deputy Banner Head responsible

for management of industrial and mining enterprises. He arrived with his bald head bared and a pair of shades covering his face, which he didn't take off even inside the cell — it seemed he wasn't afraid of falling on his ass. At first glance he appeared deaf and blind, but when he spoke to Yesu he was all smiles. After he'd familiarized himself with the course of events, he tactfully criticized the herder for having gone a bit overboard. He should have requested reparations through the proper channels. Even so, the main responsibility lay with the mining firm, and as the leader was charged with managing the Banner, this was also an oversight on his own part, and so forth.

He beat around the bush, but the gist of it was that Yesu should dampen the flames, not let things get out of hand or negatively impact the reputation of the Huolun Mine, which made such a weighty contribution to the local government's coffers. Deputy Banner Head Yang dawdled the better part of the night there with Yesu, chatting about this and that, appeasing him for the most part, even hinting that if the herder ever encountered problems in the future, Yang could help resolve them — but Yesu would first have to guarantee that the affair would stop here and now. If anyone else came to visit, Yesu's brief was to transform the major incident into a minor one, and the minor incident into a non-event. Above all, he must insist that he'd had no intention of setting himself on fire. The water in his bucket was for drinking, and he'd gone to the rooftop to rest his feet.

By this time, Yesu, who could hardly keep his eyes open, finally got the message. The deputy banner head was insisting that he'd gone upstairs to give his feet a rest; even the threat of self-immolation had never occurred. This made the honest Yesu feel a bit awkward. So many people had seen and heard him, he said. How could he flat out deny it with his own mouth, insisting that it hadn't happened?

"Don't you fret about those eyewitnesses," urged the deputy banner head, tapping his hand confidently against his chest. "I'll straighten them out myself."

In order to be done with him and get to sleep, Yesu cheerfully agreed to everything the deputy banner head suggested. Then he lay his head down and fell into deep slumber. "They opened that damned mine," he muttered to himself, "and now they're worried that the fire will spread all the way up to the officials in their black gauze caps . . ."

The following evening it was Deputy Banner Head Yun Shunaa's turn. She was in charge of government affairs such as agricultural- and forest-use water resources. She'd also taken advantage of the cover of night, but she didn't sport sunglasses. A straight-talker, she was an iron lady with a masculine air. "I helped Detention Center Chief Hadaa take care of the hospital charges for that crazy pregnant woman you've been looking after," she said right off. "I authorized payment from the Welfare Fund under the Civil Affairs Department." This overture immediately won Yesu's heart. You'd have thought he had glimpsed the Buddha. Tears of gratitude streamed down his cheeks, and he just about fell on his knees to kowtow.

Having established herself as his benefactor, she began to expound on issues including grassland desertification, calcification, salinization and land loss, and the low standard of living among farmers and herders. Meanwhile, in the northern part of the Banner, Huolun Coal was occupying a large swathe of fertile grassland, and it was positively oozing profits. The mining company had enriched the few, it was exacerbating the gap between the rich and the poor, and it often bullied its neighbors. Right from the start she'd been against mining in the grasslands. She had written an open letter to her superiors laying out the pros and cons. As a result, she'd

offended those in power and harmed her chances for promotion.

Yesu grew a bit anxious as he listened. “Banner Head Yun, please be a little more direct. What do you want me to do?”

Yun Shunaa nodded, smiling. “I didn’t come to tell you to do anything. I came to praise you. For your action, for doing the right thing! In order to protect your rights, you showed great courage, and great intelligence. Filling your bucket with water to pretend you intended to set yourself on fire — that move proves that the people are the smartest, and most creative!”

Yesu still felt as if the clouds were obscuring the mountains in a blanket of fog. “Banner Chief Yun, just tell me straight,” he couldn’t help asking again. “What is it you want me to do?”

Deputy Banner Head Yun was not pleased. “Comrade Herder, how can you be so crass? Didn’t I already tell you: I haven’t come to get you to do something, I came to praise you! I came to express my sympathy, in other words. You farmers and herdsmen live a tough life. You’re among the grass-roots masses. To be concerned about you, cherish and protect you, this is our unshirkable duty. I hope from now on that you will continue to raise consciousness of your rights, and adopt a zero tolerance approach to Huolun Coal, which is infringing upon those rights . . .”

“‘Zero tolerance’ . . . what’s that mean?” Yesu asked, tilting his head to one side.

“It means not to tolerate. ‘Zero’ is equivalent to nil. It doesn’t exist, there is no tolerance! You all have to stand firm, and correctly and resolutely express your opinion. Then it’s easier for your superiors to speak out, and back you up.”

Yesu finally began to get the picture. After he’d seen off the the highly principled, well-

intentioned deputy banner head, Yesu collapsed on his bed. “Teelee has become a pawn on a chessboard, and a prized one at that,” he murmured to himself. “But who should Teelee listen to?”

The third night was the hardest to endure. They came in three separate waves, each more formidable than the last.

First were Banner Head Buyan and Banner Party Secretary Guan the “Tiger-fighter.” The pair familiarized themselves with the ins and outs of the affair, then quizzed him about who had visited during the past three days. Reporters aside, which cadres had called on him, what they had said, and so forth. Naturally, Yesu couldn’t withhold the facts. He was an honest man who knew his place, so he recounted things as they had occurred. What’s more, the two were the most senior officials in the entire Banner. In the past they were referred to as “Lords.”

During one armed confrontation at the demarcation between Naiman Banner and Hure Banner, Yesu had seen Lord Buyan race to the front, place himself between the two packs of feuding wolves, and fire his Mauser. This instantly pacified the red-eyed hordes who had been determined to let blood flow. It had left a strong impression, Yesu couldn’t fib to a leader like that. Satisfied, the Lords nodded, exchanged glances and left immediately. They hadn’t stayed long.

Yesu himself felt less than content, perhaps even a bit let down. “Let’s put Teelee to bed early tonight. No need to wash up or anything.” He rubbed his smelly feet and had just collapsed on the bed when the lock on the door outside his cell began clanging. It made quite a racket.

“Damn!” Yesu sat bolt upright. “Which temple’s immortal will it be this time?”

“Hey, you’ve become a star, a big celebrity,

what are you doing asleep? Hasn't anyone told you, you're in trouble, deep trouble. Eh?" A tall, chubby old policeman with the air of an official laughed heartily. Detention Center Chief Hadaa accompanied him, and behind them was planted a bevy of police, male and female. They observed Yesu with intense curiosity, like rubber-necking humans ogling monkeys performing in the street.

Little Li, who was in charge of Yesu, brought a chair over for the elderly policeman to sit on, and addressed him as Police Chief Wang. Only then did Yesu understand why Chief Hadaa was paying him a visit in the middle of the night.

"What name is it you go by: Teelee Yesu or Yesu Mergen?" said the Police Chief, commencing his questioning.

"Everyone calls me Teelee Yesu. But it's written 'Yesu Mergen' in my household registration.

"What's this 'Teelee Yesu' mean?"

"*Teelee* means fool, idiot, a good-for-nothing. It's used in all the villages in Yangximu River valley."

"You're up front about it, you don't take offense?"

"What good would that do? It's just the kind of person I am."

"True enough. Why would an intelligent person pile three dead sheep on his shoulders, run to the roof of somebody's building, and threaten to set himself on fire?"

"Excuse me, sir. I deposited the three dead sheep in their office, then I ran up to the rooftop. And it wasn't to set myself on fire. It was to *pretend* to set myself on fire."

"Ha ha ha! Right, right. You ran upstairs to pretend to set yourself on fire. And you didn't carry a dynamite pack, you carried a bucket of

water!" The chief was highly amused. The gaggle of police laughed along with him.

"I'm just that sort of an idiot. So I don't blame anyone for giving me this nickname. Chief Wang, I'm begging you all. Let me go now! I admit my error and I deserve to go to hell," he pleaded. "But don't keep a *teelee* like me locked up. There's a ton of chores awaiting me back home . . ."

"As for releasing you, that's up to Hadaa here. Save your whining for him. You're no *teelee*. You don't lack guts and your thinking is spot on. Fill a bucket with water to give people a scare — only you would think that up. No wonder people say sly peasants are full of crooked ideas. You went looking for trouble. But did you have any other grand schemes up your sleeve?"

"Grand schemes? Except for getting compensation for my three sheep, I didn't have any other ideas. The coal mine managers changed their attitude afterwards. They admitted they were wrong and paid up, so the matter's done with. But ever since I entered your slammer things have dragged on forever. This harassment is enough to drive a man crazy!"

"Hehe, so the mistake is ours, is it? Okay, okay. As long as you didn't have any other big ideas or grand schemes. Hadaa, when the time comes, just send him home and leave it at that. Don't leave him here to pickle like cabbage, attracting flies all day long! My head aches just listening to him!"

Police Chief Wang departed, followed by the queue of onlookers. For one thing, he had completed his inspection, and for another, he had seen with his own eyes the legendary personality who had masterminded this farce, and satisfied the curiosity of his underlings too.

Yesu was quite pleased too. Tomorrow he'd politely request Chief Hadaa release him ahead

of time. Tonight he could get himself some solid shut-eye.

But he was mistaken.

It was some time after midnight when he was awoken from a sweet sleep by the poke of a police truncheon. His whole body trembled.

Two mysterious types entered. Neither wore a police uniform; they had a more inscrutable air about them than uniformed police. Their eyes and faces exuded a certain chill. They were accompanied by Chief Hadaa, who explained they were from the City Police Bureau's Division 8. "They'd like to pose a few questions. Answer them seriously and frankly," he instructed. Then he left, taking Little Li with him.

Faced with this pair of forbidding fellows, Yesu's heart shivered and he felt a bit afraid. Who was behind this? What did Division 8 do? Why did even fearless old Ha show them such reverence and then retreat?

One took notes, and the other posed their queries. From full name, age and gender, to the status of three generations of his ancestors: their professions, their criminal records, their political leanings, and so forth. The things they asked left Yesu puzzled. They had nothing to do with him, like wind and horses or thunder and cows. It reminded him of a farmer thrusting a pole up into a date palm again and again in a vain attempt to knock down one more piece of fruit. But the detention center director had told him that answering these questions was very important.

"Do you profess any faith?" In the dimness, the questioner's eyes sparkled darkly with an inscrutable, icy light. He was on his fifth cigarette, and the tips of his index and middle fingers were stained deep yellow. Yesu glanced at his own fingertips. He smoked too, but they were far less yellowish than this fellow's. "Looks like work at Division 8 is no piece of

cake," he reflected.

Yesu sensed that they were nearing the real point of the grilling.

"I'm asking you! Do you profess any faith? What are you thinking about?"

"Uh, I wasn't thinking anything . . . faith, faith. What is this 'faith'? Can you explain it to me?"

For a moment, the man from Division 8 was stumped. What *was* faith, actually? How could he explain it in a manner both concrete and precise? In the past they'd bring up Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought, but not so much these days. "The Three Represents" or the Scientific Outlook on Development? But are they examples of a "faith"? Perhaps Communism, or Serve the People? The former was practically a byword for Paradise, and it also counted as an illusory ideal. But was it a genuine faith? As for serving the people, that was a guideline for party work promoted by the leadership, and shouldn't be considered a faith. For a moment, his train of thought was thrown into chaos. He was confused but he didn't know why.

The man from Division 8 banged on the table and cleared his throat: "Listen good to what I'm saying. I want you to tell me if you have any faith. That is, I'm asking you if you believe in any faith. Faith of the religious sort, I mean."

Religious faith? Pitiful Yesu's expression remained clueless.

"Right. Like Buddhism, or Christianity, or Islam or something."

"Oh! So that's what Division 8 Leader is getting at. I see. Yes, yes, I believe in the Buddha. But I don't believe in Buddhism."

The man from Division 8 was left speechless again. "Believing in Buddha *means* believing in Buddhism," he explained. "They're one and the

same.”

“One and the same? That’s fine then, whatever Division 8 Leader suggests.”

The man from Division 8 was tongue-tied. He suddenly realized that he’d been led around in circles by this blasted idiot, and now he was guilty of entrapment.

“Actually, I’m not much of a believer in Buddha. I’m so poor that I can’t even get a wife. Buddha hasn’t really looked after me. Our Banner refurbished that grand temple lately, but I’ve only been a few times. Everyone said the *kaiguang* ceremony was over and done with. I figured that was that, there was nothing left — *guangguang*, right? What kind of spirit would still be there? So when they began the renovations, I snuck inside. What did I find but half a giant jade Buddha lying casually on the floor in the raw. That gave me a mighty scare! Hehe. Afterwards, they chased me out. Yep, that’s how it is, my belief in Buddha. Sometimes I don’t think about it for months on end. Anyway, you just need to remember not to do evil things and be kind, that’s all.”

Having listened up to this point, the man from Division 8 began to experience the same doubts as many others had. This guy in front of him — the legendary fool — was he a confused egg, an idiotic good-for-nothing, or a wise man with a streak of genius?

He sized up that dark, wizened, and rarely washed common face, and for a moment he hesitated. He lit up another cigarette and banged the table again. “Have you heard any news from the west?”

“The ‘west’? Do you mean Khar Ereg and Yangximu Village to the west of our village?”

“No, no. Further west.”

“That’d be Jujaan Yingzi and Gakhai Mountain,” said Yesu, slapping his leg and jumping to his

feet, pleased he had guessed right.

“Sit back down. I mean far away in the west.”

“Where would that be? The furthest I’ve been is to the western slope of Gakhai Mountain, looking for a straying cow,” said Yesu, scratching his head.

“Qinghai or Tibet, for instance. Or Aba Prefecture in Sichuan.”

“You’re talking about the edge of the world. Such far-off places. I’ve never even dreamt of them, let alone visited.”

“I’m not asking if you’ve been there. What I’m asking is, have you heard any news from there?”

“News? Could Division 8 Leader give me an example, and let me think about it?”

The man from Division 8 had suddenly grown excited. He snuffed out his cigarette butt. “For instance, someone died there, burned himself to death or something, and then someone taught you to do as he did.”

The man from Division 8 had finally uttered the question he most wanted to ask. He exhaled at length, as if relieved of a heavy burden.

“Someone taught me how? Division 8 Leader, who is this ‘someone’ you mean? Could you be a bit more specific?”

The man from Division 8 gestured to the south. “For instance, the lamas at the three big temples in Hure Banner we discussed before.”

“Them? Who says they’re real lamas? They’re all migrant workers from the village! Ha ha ha . . .” Yesu couldn’t help guffawing. “They’ve been recruited for the sake of the tourists! Except for the *om mani padme hum* mantra, they can’t recite anything. I hear the only old lama who survived the Land Reform Campaign and the Cultural Revolution kicked the bucket the year

before last from worrying too much about refurbishing the temples. So now all the lamas there are phony! They're all living the easy life, what with the state investing money for their keep. Without connections, how could a regular fellow get such a dream job?"

Hearing this, the interrogator was once again struck speechless. He shook his head from side to side, and forced a smile. This line of questioning had nearly reached a dead-end. He decided to give it one last try.

"Hey, don't change the subject. Are you sure no one put you up to this? Did anyone entice you with an SMS or a video? Particularly some external force, like the Dalai Lama Clique?"

"Division 8 Leader, Lord 8, what's this you're talking about? How is it the more you talk the less I understand?" Yesu tried his best to open wide his hazy eyes.

"I'm going to ask you directly then. Regardless whether it was a bucket of water or oil you carried to the top of the coal mine headquarters, did any person or organization induce you or trick you to go there and self-immolate? Answer honestly according to the facts!"

When he heard this, Yesu was more than a little peeved. "I already said eight hundred times over," he said, almost yelling. "Teelee wasn't really going to set himself on fire. I took a bucket of water to scare them into compensating me for my sheep! What are you driving at? Who would dare go and burn the body that his mother gave him? The pain would be enough to kill you! Only an idiot would do that!"

"I may be *teelee*, but I know what it means for my flesh to hurt! When you suggest somebody put me up to it, that's even more ridiculous. Who doesn't know I'm so poor that I can't afford a TV or a mobile? Forget about Hure Banner or the west or the east, even in our

Talin Village no one pays any attention to me. If you don't believe me, go and ask!"

"I'm telling you, this trick of taking a bucket of water to scare them was purely my own invention! I achieved my goal, and made them cough up blood to compensate me for my sheep! So what? Don't go on forever about some nonsense and try to lose me in some maze. I understand. As stupid as I am, I get it!"

That said, he refused to open his mouth again.

Lord 8 was briefly rendered incapable of speech. His partner recording the interrogation beside him couldn't help snickering quietly.

Just as he was searching for an excuse to make his exit, the questioner heard a thunderous snore. The old herder had fallen back onto the wooden bed where he'd been sitting, and entered a deep slumber. They yelled but couldn't wake him up, and they couldn't get him to sit upright either. When they turned him over, a noxious odor emerged from beneath his body. He'd obviously farted and the stink smelled up the whole room. The two men from Division 8 exited, holding their noses. Lord 8 was furious.

Chief Hadaa, who had been waiting in the office the whole time, came over and cracked a big smile. "You leaders have had a hard time. That's just how this fellow behaves. The more you poke at him, the more he stinks. These last few days he hasn't had a quiet moment day or night. He's really been terribly harassed and awfully short on sleep. It's almost daybreak. You two should rest too. How about putting things off till tomorrow?"

"Forget tomorrow, Old Ha! We have to rush back overnight to the city. They're awaiting our report over there, going crazy! Let's leave it at that. I've basically figured out what makes this guy tick."

"Fine, fine. I know more about that than

anyone,” said Hadaa. “I’ve been familiar with him ever since he was born and bared his damn butt!”

“Let’s hope it’s just a simple matter. I’m just worried that the affair will spread outside and take on a nose and eyes! You’d better seal that bucket of water and lock it in a safe where no one is allowed to touch it. As for that guy, keep him in detention. Let’s wait and see what they say upstairs,” said Lord 8 as he got in the car.

“Huh? Keep him here? That jail cell stinks so bad no human being will go in there!” complained Hadaa.

“Word will come quick. Very quick,” the voice flew out of Lord 8’s car, resounding in the dark night. Over on the other side of Chagaan Davaa Hill, hazy light had already appeared in the sky.

When I got back to Hadaa’s office, he was still deep in sleep on a bed behind a screen. His snoring was no less thunderous than Yesu’s. I shook my head and turned to leave, but Little Li woke him up.

“Brother, you’ve seen that fellow. Very bizarre. Such a good-for-nothing,” said Hadaa as he steeped tea for us. “How come things keep happening to him?”

“I wonder too,” I chuckled. “Are you going to keep him in detention?”

“What else can I do? Division 8 left word it would just be a day or two longer. Some people upstairs are hypersensitive,” said Hadaa.

But before their verdict came down, something happened that no one had foreseen.

Yesu had a mysterious benefactor, it seemed. [end excerpt]

Bruce Humes

Keen to experience socialism with Chinese characteristics back in the ’80s, Bruce Humes first took a detour to Taipei and Hong Kong but went on to reside in Shanghai, Kunming and Shenzhen. He specializes in translating Chinese-language fiction by or about China’s non-Han peoples, particularly those who speak an Altaic tongue, such as the reindeer-herding Evenki (*Last Quarter of the Moon*) and the Uyghur in Xinjiang (*Confessions of a Jade Lord*). He headed online content development at *Chief Executive China*, hosts the blog 非漂 [Fēi Piāo], and periodically obeys the primal urge to leave the China womb for character-building foreign language immersion classes in cities such as Paris, St. Petersburg, Kyoto and Istanbul. On the 2018 agenda: Kiswahili in Dar es Salaam.