

All Under Heaven

John Brunner

English writer John Brunner has traveled extensively over the past couple of years. He started out at home as a featured speaker at Southampton University's annual writers' conference in April 1994. In May he was a guest of honor at the European SF Convention in Timisoara, Romania. In September he was the only British speaker at a scientific colloquium at Chateaufallon, France, and he recently returned to the U.K. after engagements in the United States *and* Canada. "All Under Heaven" is part of a rapidly growing series of stories set in the homeland of his wife—Chinese artist LiYi Tan.

In the spring of this year there was a great fall of stars, whereat the emperor and the people were much perturbed...

—"*Annals of the Middle Kingdom*," scroll XXIII

When the party from the distant capital came to Bu Zhuo, Chodeng was helping his uncle Pi-li to mend the roof of the Lai Dao temple, the shrine of the Town God. The work was not urgent, but it and similar tasks helped to stave off boredom during the endless-seeming dry months when it became obvious why the little town had acquired its ironical name, "sometimes rice." The snows had long melted off the high ground to the north, though owing to the altitude they often endured until midsummer, and the lie of the land to the south was such that at this season moist air was forced to shed its rain before reaching here. Prudent management, plus two never-failing wells sunk under the direction of a long-ago *fung shui* master, ensured there was always water to cook with, and for humans and their livestock to drink, but there was nothing like enough to irrigate the paddy-fields. Parched and cracked between the dry ditches, with shriveled stalks left over from the spring harvest punctuating their surface like pinfeathers on a carelessly plucked bird, they were the haunt now of a

few lame ducks, their webs pitifully torn, reserved to breed from when autumn brought clouds anew.

They had also hosted frogs, though those had of course been eaten. More, however, would appear once the now-empty Min Lu He filled again.

The newcomers followed the riverside road from the south, which did in the strictest sense continue beyond the town but past this point could barely be called a path, thanks to a succession of landslides. They were preceded by a mounted soldier bearing a dragon banner on a long pole, signifying that they came on business for the ruler of "all under heaven." Then came foot-soldiers, with business-like halberds and scabbarded swords, commanded by a mustachioed man who must be a senior officer, perhaps even a general, for over his leather and bronze cuirass he wore an elaborately embroidered silk square depicting a tiger. It was sight of him that stirred from their heat-induced lethargy those of the residents who preferred to laze all day in warm weather—Pi-li was forever grouching how numerous they were—and inspired young people and especially children to rouse up and follow as they entered the town. One or two, more energetic than the rest, hurried ahead with the intention of alerting Hundan, the mayor as everybody called him, though in fact he held no formal office—just owned more land than anybody else hereabout, being therefore unenviably well known to the one imperial envoy who regularly paid visits to this isolated community, the tax-collector. The courtesy title helped him endure the latter's depredations with better grace.

However, it was not the sight of a real general that drew Chodeng's eyes, screwed up against sun glare despite the shade afforded by awnings of woven rice-straw. He was far more struck by the other recognizably important member of the little troupe, a man of middle age clad in a rich silk robe and sporting a round hat surmounted by a peacock feather, upon whose saddlebow reposed the unmistakable red-lacquered box of a scribe's compendium. Even in this remote corner of the empire there was no need for banners to identify such a person as a scholar who, successful in the imperial examinations, had cut himself off from whatever his roots might have been—for in the eyes of the examiners all candidates were equal, peasant or landowner, craftsman or monk—and risen to great heights in the service of the state.

Yet (and this was what distracted Chodeng completely from the task in hand) it was not this eminent personage, as might have been expected,

who was enjoying the benefit of a broad umbrella with a gold fringe of near-imperial density borne by a surly-looking fellow trudging in his wake. No, its shade was being lavished on a mule that bore a much younger man also wearing silk, a clerk no doubt, lolling back and forth on his saddle, mouth ajar as though gasping for air. What could account for such an improbable—indeed improper—turn of events?

Chodeng's speculations were cut short by a loud roar.

"Nephew!"

He returned to the here and now with a guilty start. His uncle was glaring up from ground-level across a pile of newly delivered tiles, bundled with rice-straw rope to prevent them cracking on the way.

"I know what you're dreaming of! Running off to strange remote places like you've read about, tagging along at the pony-heels of someone like that old codger over there!"

The diagnosis was so accurate Chodeng didn't even attempt to reply.

"Well, you're not getting the chance! Your father, my elder brother to whom I owed the same allegiance as our father had he been alive, left your portion to me"—here it came, the same old song, over and over— "with instructions to raise you in a secure trade with a secure future. Maybe your mother had different ideas, but she's dead too, let me remind you—and in any case who pays attention to what women say? And what makes you think the life of a scholar is secure? Maybe for that guy it is, with a post at court and an escort of soldiers when he takes to the road! But you, who couldn't even hope for a job as a village schoolmaster? Don't make me laugh! Now drop the hoist-rope and haul this lot up! Put your back into it!"

As he sweatingly complied, Chodeng thought of the dreams he had so long cherished, and wished his mother were still alive. His father had felt much the same way as did his uncle about learning and examinations, but one of his mother's cousins, when she was a little girl, had scored an amazing success through his elucidations of the works of K'ung-fu-tze and been advanced three civil ranks at a single go.

Of course, the incumbent emperor had then carried out a purge of dissident intellectuals, so in the end...

By now the little procession had wound past, its rear brought up by pack mules laden with baskets for grain and jars for wine and water, that made the onlookers forget the brief though welcome distraction afforded by the strangers and remember only how their demands would yet further diminish the stores the townsfolk must rely on until autumn. Already there were mutters of complaint, and he could not find it in his heart to disagree.

He sighed, and applied himself dutifully to roof-tiles.

By sunset lodgings had been found for the general Kao-li and his scholar-companion Bi-tso, plus a couch for the latter's clerk, sick with fever following an insect-bite and clearly too ill to travel on. The common soldiers were billeted in barns and sheds. A banquet of sorts was in preparation for the former group, featuring salted river-fish and wind-dried duck, at which the so-called mayor was to play host; and albeit unwillingly rations had been provided under imperial requisition for the rest of the strangers: pickled turnip, pickled cabbage, and millet-cakes instead of the decent rice the wealthier folk were reluctantly sharing with the group's leaders, but better fare than one might have expected given the condition of the surrounding land.

There was, however, a problem irking the general, on top of his conviction that it was high time he was allowed to retire to his country estate, for age made him stiff after riding for even a hour, let alone all day as he had had to ever since leaving the capital. At some stage they had traversed one of the invisible linguistic frontiers that crisscrossed the empire, testimony to the way it had been cobbled together from—so legend claimed—seven mutually hostile states. In this town not only the pronunciation but the words people used rang strangely in the visitors' ears. In principle *wen*—script—was shared by all the empire's subjects, and had been since its standardization by the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang; in practice, that reform's usefulness depended on finding people who could read and write, and there was not even a schoolteacher here, only the elderly blear-eyed priest in charge of the temple. He could make shift at deciphering a few ancient texts; he knew the "family books" of the community more or less by heart, so people turned to him for guidance when naming a child or choosing a favorable day for a wedding or to build a house; and for lack of an alternative he was relied on by Hundan to interpret new regulations when a decree was brought from the capital— which happened increasingly often as the emperor's ambition

spawned ever greater need for tax-money and forced labor.

But as an interpreter the fellow left much to be desired. As much, say, as did to persons from the imperial court these rough-hewn pine benches cushioned with straw pads, these floors of trampled dirt, these clumsy timber huts idiotically sited if not downhill then indubitably downwind of the place to which the local privies drained...

At length, in exasperation, Kao-li shoved aside the dishes before him—causing a momentary panic among the mayor's wives and the other womenfolk who had been drafted in to wait on the distinguished visitors and who had brought their finest porcelain with them—and shouted, "Is there no one in your miserable town who understands civilized speech?"

There was a moment of dead silence. Then, from the shadows at the extreme end of the grain-store where they were assembled, the only room large enough in the whole of Bu Zhuo, a quavering voice offered, in an absurdly flowery style, "Many there are whose spirits quail at the prospect of encountering a general, for his reputation on the field of battle makes one think at once of blood and death."

Bi-tso, who had been on the verge of drowsing after not merely a tiring day but a tiring week, jerked abruptly back to full awareness, just as Kao-li snorted, "What high-flown rubbish is that? I can't understand it any better!"

"Wait, cousin," Bi-tso interrupted. "He's quoting a poem. And very aptly, what is more. This is an improbable discovery. Come forward, you!"

Chodeng complied nervously, very conscious of how he must look to these exalted gentry: a scrawny, somewhat under-tall boy of seventeen, who had had neither time nor water to cleanse himself after his day's labor at the temple.

"Who is he?" the general rumbled. But he was addressing Hundan, not the boy directly.

"No one of importance," fawned the mayor.

"You can say that twice!" roared Pi-li, afraid perhaps of losing his unpaid helper. "He's an orphan with a headful of ridiculous dreams—"

"So once was I!" snapped Bi-tso, jolting erect on his uncomfortable seat. "Now I am an uncle of the emperor!"

The company fell silent, abashed.

"Draw closer, you. Tell me about yourself."

Trembling, Chodeng recounted how his mother and father had disagreed about his future and in the end both had been puffed away by a wind that bore pestilence. There were sighs and nods from others present who had similarly lost friends and relations. Bi-tso listened intently.

"I see," he said at length. He was employing the refined speech of the capital with far more subtlety and precision than the general who presumably was accustomed to the rough usage of army camps. "Well, then! As well as quoting poetry—with not too bad an accent, let me say—can you make clear to these rustic oafs the reason for our presence? And persuade them that the sooner they help us on our way the less we will trouble them?"

"What's he going on about?" Hundan grumbled. Chodeng found himself being urged to the center of the room, at the very focus of everyone's attention. He had to swallow hard and often because his mouth was dry from sheer terror, until a signal from Bi-tso led one of the attendant women to pass him a cup of hot barley-water. After it he felt better.

Gaining confidence, Chodeng explained. Instantly concluding that he enjoyed fluent command of both dialects, though it was far from the truth, Kao-li overwhelmed him with a rush of detail. It was less obscure and allusive than what Bi-tso was saying, yet Bi-tso—clearly more accustomed to the exigencies of translation—had to come to his rescue. In the end they worked out a compromise, and by the time they finished Chodeng found himself more than a little astonished both at what he had accomplished and also at the mission these travelers were committed to.

Their presence was due to an event everyone in Bu Zhuo remembered save babes in arms. In mid-spring there had been "a visitation of dragons"—at any rate, that was how people referred to the brief but brilliant shower of falling stars that had been seen, so they now found out, as far away as the capital. Legend held that after such a display of celestial fireworks one might occasionally find pieces of stone bearing the marks of intense heat. Whether they had actually fallen from heaven was debatable,

there being many who insisted it was impossible because the essence of heaven differed from that of the earth. It was partly in order to settle the argument that Bi-tso had exploited his influence as father of the emperor's current favorite and organized this party to investigate. Whether the fallen stones would prove to be composed of some strange celestial substance seemed to him unlikely; however, he did suspect they might contain metals so rare that if he did not seize this opportunity he might be doomed to join his ancestors without ever enjoying a chance to investigate their properties.

And, so it had been established by a month of long-range inquiries, if any stones had fallen they must have struck on the high ground immediately to the north of Bu Zhuo. Thither the party was bound, and apart from needing to replenish their rations they had stopped here to learn as much as possible about the remainder of their route.

That provoked long faces. In the distant past, so Hundan explained via Chodeng, there had been trade with a village to the north—there was no actual town worth mentioning—but more than a generation ago landslides had closed the pass, since when nothing had been heard of the imperial subjects formerly said to be living in that direction.

It was doubtful whether they could be thriving, at all events. The name of their village was even worse-omened than Bu Zhuo's, for it was Gan Han, meaning something like "never enough water." What the inhabitants had chiefly traded was pheasants and other wild game in exchange for rice, because they lacked the water to grow their own. They had even been obliged to buy straw now and then.

"Can pack mules negotiate the pass?" Bi-tso leaned forward, staring not at Hundan but at Chodeng. The boy stumblongued in embarrassment. How to render into the polite speech of these strangers his vague recollections of what he had been told about that long-neglected road? Some claimed that, given a valuable enough consignment, mules could be used to re-open the trade; others, that it would call for men, but even so it would offer a profitable boost to Bu Zhuo's economy during the dry months when the upper reaches of the Min Lu He were most passable. In early summer, of course, they became a succession of violent rapids.

However, before he could reply Kao-li intervened with a soldier's bluntness, demonstrating that he had thought the matter through faster than Chodeng.

"Even where a packhorse cannot go, a man may!"

At the prospect of the town being called on to furnish porters there was general dismay. The general cut it short.

"You have all that much to occupy you in this time of drought?" he gibed. "We didn't see convincing evidence of the fact when we entered your hamlet this afternoon! Still, I gather we are tolerably close to our goal, and in a situation of potential danger I would rather rely on trusted comrades than unwilling conscripts!"

He swept the assembly with a glare. Having contrived to make them feel relieved and insulted at the same time, he resumed.

"Nonetheless we shall need to make ourselves understood when we arrive. What do the people at Gan Han speak—the same barbarous gibberish as here?"

"General! It would be an honor for me to act as your interpreter!"

The words escaped Chodeng before he could bite them back. Pi-li looked instantly furious. The general, on the other hand, gave an approving nod, and Bi-tso grew positively benign.

"I rather expected you to say that. Mayor, he has already performed a valuable service and now he is offering further help. Has he been given his dinner?"

"Ah..." Hundan's stock of words ran out and he signed no.

"Then find him a bowl and fill it."

Overwhelmed, Chodeng accepted the savory-smelling food and a pair of chopsticks. Before recovering enough to taste it, though, he had an inspiration.

Turning to his uncle, who was scowling worse than thunderclouds, he held out bowl and chopsticks with a bow. From a dry mouth he said, "General—uncle of the emperor—if my father were present I believe all would expect me to share this gift with him. The brother of my father accepted me when I was orphaned and has made me his apprentice. I owe to him the fact that I have a trade."

And waited.

"Well said," Bi-tso pronounced at last.

"Granted," rumbled Kao-li. "Yet it is for us, about the business of the Son of Heaven, that you are to perform essential duties. You, boy, not your uncle. Eat and drink."

For another long moment Chodeng hesitated. The expression on Pi-li's face made his feelings abundantly clear.

Let's hope the pass is negotiable and I don't have to return home before his temper has a chance to cool!

"Boy, I said eat!" the general boomed. "We don't want you fainting on the road!"

Faced with this direct order Chodeng could only give a wan smile and ply his chopsticks.

While he was eating things happened with rapidity quite out of keeping with the summer heat or the usual pace of events at Bu Zhuo. In particular, it occurred to Hundan and the old priest that if Chodeng was to be absent the community's tax-liability ought to be reduced. Furthermore, as Pi-li pointed out, a fair wage must be agreed for the boy's services, of which if he failed to return there might well be some balance owing, that would need to be passed on to the next-of-kin, meaning himself...

When had it been agreed that his offer of help should be taken so literally?

In no time at all, it seemed, for here was a neatly drafted contract being presented for him to apply his chop. Embarrassed all over again, he had to confess that he didn't own one, but redeemed himself by asking for brush and ink and executing the characters appropriate to his name accurately and with a flourish. To the scholar's lift of an eyebrow he murmured only, "My mother."

Interestingly, Bi-tso did not seem to find it odd that he had been instructed by a woman. They must indeed arrange things otherwise elsewhere in the empire.

"Now off to bed with you, young fellow," rasped the general. "We shall need you at first light, or rather, an hour before. Bring some of the sort of clothes you wouldn't expect to need at this time of year. We may well encounter snow beside tomorrow's route."

Snow? Just by climbing the next range of hills? Yet there was no hint of a joke in the general's tone, or even his eyes. It began to dawn on Chodeng that he was about to enter a very different world.

One, to be precise, where snow could be found in summer and stones could fall from the sky.

Later, when Chodeng looked back, he found it incredible that so many events could be crammed into a single day.

Despite scarcely having slept for excitement, from the moment the group set off, he being mounted on the mule previously assigned to the sick clerk, he could not prevent himself from plying Bi-tso with questions. The scholar not only tolerated the interrogation but even told a few wry anecdotes that did much to lighten the journey. However, well before mid-morning the pressure of reality started hindering the flow of words much as tumbled rocks beset their route. As the sun climbed higher in a cloudless sky, and as it became increasingly plain that the light-colored patches beside the track ahead did in fact betoken snow in summer, the going became one continuous struggle. Of countless shades from ashen-grey to sandy-brown, vast irregular boulders filled and overflowed what a scant month ago had been the bed of the Min Lu He, but was now completely innocent of water.

Just as well, Chodeng found himself thinking. Picturing how his mount would slip and stagger if the rocks beneath his hoofs were awash in a torrent, he had to shudder.

And although the air felt chill, the sun's rays beat his head as cruelly as any teacher's fan.

Long past the point at which even Pi-li would have permitted a respite for a sip of water Kao-li insisted on trudging upward. Then came a bend where one of the pack mules fell under its load, screaming horribly as it broke a leg. There was nothing to be done but slaughter it on the spot—saving the meat, of course. Its load was taken over by the soldiers, glum

but resigned, and even as they shrugged the burden on to their shoulders the first buzzards caught the scent of blood and came wheeling to investigate.

Chodeng clambered down from his saddle to free his mule for other duties. To Bi-tso's look of inquiry he responded with a shrug.

"Frankly, master scholar, I feel safer on two feet than four."

"If I were your age," Kao-li grunted, overhearing, "so would I!"

Yet within the hour he found himself regretting his decision. In straw sandals, his feet were ill-protected against the increasing coldness of the ground, and he envied the Mongol-style felt boots most of the soldiers owned. Occasionally untrammelled, more often called on to help push and pull a horse or mule over a tricky stretch, he learned how badly he could ache in muscles he had not hitherto known he possessed.

Somehow, grimly, he kept going.

Midday slipped by, the sun declining from the zenith. It remained bright but its radiance lost its heat. The true temperature of the mountain air struck through. Chodeng found himself shivering despite the exertion of scrambling up this rock-blocked watercourse...

Up?

Of a sudden, it dawned that in fact the going was easier, and not merely because they had at last cleared the final rockslides. Bi-tso was drowsing in his saddle but not completely asleep. Sensing Chodeng's change of pace at his side, he roused.

"We must have crested the ridge," the boy whispered. "We're going downhill again. At least I think we are."

From his position a few paces to the rear Kao-li gave a snort.

"Haven't traveled much, have you, young fellow? If we're truly going down, how come the riverbed still parallels the track? No, the crest of this ridge is still a long way off, somewhere up that way." He pointed at a cwm branching off to the west. "But we're not climbing any more. We're on the level, which can often give that illusion after a steep ascent."

Bi-tso was gathering his wits. Now he cleared his throat.

"There are few records at the capital concerning this area. It was last surveyed in the time of the Silk Emperor." That, Chodeng remembered, had been a century or more ago. "But it seems likely that we are approaching a plateau. Also, last night, I was able to question the priest at Bu Zhuo—after you had gone to bed, young fellow," he added in a stern tone. "He made himself understood, more or less. At any rate his temple records proved more comprehensible than his normal gibberish. He said something about people living where the road and the river divide. I suspect we can look forward to reaching our destination at latest by sundown."

He added with wry irony, "Which, Chodeng, for your information, occurs later on a high mountain than in the valleys below. You should be able to calculate why."

For no reason he could think of, save that the sun had been fierce all day in this thin air, the boy felt his face glow burning red. He disguised embarrassment by reclaiming his mule.

Minutes later, however, as the party turned aside from the watercourse and continued on what suddenly became a level track, all else was wiped from their minds at the sight of the improbable spectacle confronting them.

This was the place called Gan Han, "not enough water"? But it was green! Its clustered buildings, although any of them would have been regarded even in Bu Zhuo as little better than a cattleshed—than a kennel for a guard-dog!—were ringed by paddies where rice bent grain-heavy heads, where frogs leapt joyously, where clipped-winged waterbirds scurried madly along the irrigation ditches always striving and always failing to take off... Why, the very air seemed impregnated with radiance like a *bodhisattva's* nimbus in a temple painting!

Chodeng gasped aloud, but instantly checked himself, expecting to be chided by Bi-tso for his ignorance of other lands and even other towns. The older man, though, and even the general, appeared to be equally taken aback. As for the military escort, who had by now been able to restore their loads to the surviving pack mules (the one required to carry its fellow's meat was braying in near-human protest), they were frankly gawping.

"Is this what your study of the records led you to expect?" Kao-li muttered.

"Not in the least," confessed Bi-tso. "What are we to do?"

The answer had already presented itself. Down among the irrigation ditches there were people at work: not as many as one might have expected in view of the size of the cultivated area, but a few here tending the rice-plants, a few more there opening and closing earthen dikes to redirect the water, yet others by pairs driving and netting ducks. Growing aware of the strangers, they were gradually discontinuing their tasks and staring at the hillside. Realizing what was likely to be required of him, Chodeng swallowed hard against what all of a sudden felt as much like timidity as fear. Were there not girls working in the paddies alongside the young men?

And was one of them not shamelessly staring at him, and calling her friends to make them notice he had noticed her, while he wriggled with embarrassment and diffidence?

Of course, he had to admit she was extremely pretty: not just her face, but her legs too, as he could plainly discern because to wade in the paddy she had rolled her trousers high above her knees, and back on dry land had not bothered to lower them again.

"In the name of the Jade Emperor!" Kao-li exploded. "What's become of young men in this run-down generation? I never saw a finer pair of come-hither eyes! It can't be because her feet aren't bound, surely!"

"I should hope not!" Bi-tso chimed in. "It's a vile custom! It's only because my wife insisted—" He broke off. However, the fact that his daughter was the emperor's current favorite had already made it clear that he had lost that particular argument.

"I hate it too," Chodeng whispered. "My father married my mother because hers weren't." He forbore to mention that his father had scornfully declared that women with bound feet not only couldn't work to support their families but also gave themselves airs above their station.

"Then seize your chance, boy!" Kao-li boomed. "Go down and tell them who we are and where we come from."

"It'll have to be you," Bi-tso stressed apologetically. "We don't speak the local dialect and we mustn't risk any misunderstandings."

Chest swelling with pride, struggling with all his might to disguise the tension that threatened to make him faint, Chodeng dutifully made to dismount, only to be checked by a sharp command from Kao-li.

"Fool! A mounted man, even on a mule, is always at an advantage!"

So he rode toward the girl and her by now numerous companions, mortally afraid at every pace that he might fall off.

And spoke to her and the others, and tried again, and again, and at length, with a face as long as a winnowing pole, rode back to report, while the locals strove not to giggle.

"Well?" rasped Kao-li.

"You didn't need to bring me along," the boy said dully. "They don't speak my dialect, like at Bu Zhuo. They hail originally from your part of the country. They were sent here by another route on the orders of the last emperor because this land was empty."

"Empty?" Kao-li exploded. "Rich and fertile as it is?"

"Yes, as a punishment."

"A punishment? When it yields such bountiful harvests, while towns like yours roast in the sun and starve? Who do they think they are, to mock the agents of the emperor, the superior man who rules all under heaven?" He was working himself up into a fine fury.

Suddenly Chodeng felt extremely tired. He answered without the circumspection prudence dictated.

"I don't think they care much for emperors. After all, it was an emperor who deported their families here. At the time, apparently, this area was a real desert. They say—"

Bi-tso could contain himself no longer. "We don't need to learn any more about this place to be sure we would rather go home. It's unnatural! Such fertility, such luxuriance in the midst of mile after mile of barren

rocks! Cousin general, do I not speak for us both? But do they know anything about the visitation of dragons? About the—"

"That was the next subject we discussed," Chodeng cut in.

Bi-tso blinked. "Are you sure we mean the same thing?"

"The fall of stars?"

"Yes, of course. What—?"

Quite heedless of respect due to his elders, Chodeng snapped, "What did you think I meant? I know that's what has drawn you here, so it was the next thing I asked about, as soon as I realized they speak your dialect and not mine."

"And—?"

"And they said they've been expecting you or someone like you and it's high time you got here. But..." He hesitated.

"Go on!" Bi-tso rasped.

"I didn't completely understand what they were trying to tell me. Something about how it's only because there was a fall of stars that they now have plenty of food and water."

Bi-tso blinked in puzzlement. He hazarded, "Could they mean that searching for stars that might have reached the ground they discovered a new spring?"

"No, not at all. What they meant, I think, was—"

The banner-bearer interrupted. As Chodeng had learned during their ride, he had served as a cavalry sergeant under Kao-li in more than one battle and consequently might risk addressing him in more familiar terms than a civilian.

"Looks like you're going to have a chance to find out directly, general. There's a whole gang of locals heading this way.

"And bringing something with them the like of which I never set eyes

on before."

Can this be how a dragon looks? The question sprang unbidden to Chodeng's lips, but Bi-tso spoke before he had time to utter it.

"A phoenix? Are there still phoenixes in our decadent age?"

Mention of such a legendary, powerful creature dismayed their escorts. They exchanged glances eloquent of apprehension, only to be distracted a second later as the pack animals caught—what? The scent, perhaps, of what was approaching. Or maybe they saw it, or detected strange vibrations in the air, or registered its approach by some sense too fine for coarse humanity. At all events it frightened them, and for the next few minutes the men had all they could do to prevent the beasts from shucking their loads and bolting.

Had Chodeng had room in his mind to spare for such matters, he would have been astonished at the way, even though his mount was trying to imitate the rest, he himself clung to his reins and somehow contrived to remain in the saddle while fixing most of his attention on the amazing apparition keeping pace with the locals as they drew near. A phoenix, was it? Well, if a scholar so identified it... On first seeing it he had at once felt a dragon to be more likely. Yet—

Yet was he seeing it at all? Seeing it in the customary sense of the term? Somehow he felt not. Somehow he felt, when he tried to stare directly at it and focus its image, to get rid of the shiny hazy blur that seemed like a concentration of the strange luminosity he had already detected in the local air, what he had mentally compared to the nimbus round figures in religious paintings, that the—the creature wasn't there to be seen. Not *there* there. Nearby. In a perceptible location. But not *there* in the sense that one might walk, on his own sore human feet, to where it was. One couldn't judge how tall, how wide, how deep from front to back... In fact, apart from the bare fact of its existence, one could describe it in no terms whatsoever!

He wrenched away his fascinated gaze. He was the only one. General, scholar, bannerman, escort, all were alike transfixed. Yet the party from the village wore expressions of superiority and amusement, not excluding the girl who had first smiled at him. By now they numbered a couple of score, those who had been at work in the paddies—young folk in their

teens and twenties—having been joined by older citizens. Beyond, in the village, many others were coming into view, ranging from babies in their mothers' arms by way of craftsmen emerging from their workshops to elderly folk hirpling along on sticks.

Could this be some sort of conjurer's trick? They wore the right sort of smug expressions...

Summoning all his self-control, plus all the self-respect that would be undermined if he were to make a fool of himself in front of such a lot of people—by now as many as had gathered to greet the imperial party at Bu Zhuo, he estimated—he called out, unable to avoid addressing himself to the girl he had already talked with... but she really was very pretty.

"The distinguished scholar Bi-tso who has led us here under the protection of the esteemed general Kao-li, wishes to know by what name you call this—uh—phenomenon." He felt sweat breaking out all over his body; he could have said what he wanted to say with no trouble in his own dialect, but his command of words these people would understand was strictly limited. However, he could essay one more sentence.

"Do you consider it a phoenix, or would you class it more in the nature of a dragon?"

And it answered.

It answered.

How it was possible to tell, Chodeng had no idea, except that in his brain there came a sudden something like a bitter wind, that nonetheless bore the implication of identity and beyond that tantalizing hints of meaning. He felt as though too many words had been spoken in too short a time and he must decipher them at painful length from memory, or as though he had suddenly been handed an examination paper in a subject he was unprepared for.

Further evidence: the soldiers threw their weapons down and fled.

Chodeng too wanted to dismount and run, did not, and failed to decide whether he was held back more by reluctance to be shamed, or scholarly fascination... or maybe he was simply paralyzed by fear. He hoped his

willingness to recognize that last possibility might stand to his credit in escaping the karmic wheel.

And wondered at the same time whether the very wish implied vainglory....

He was snatched back to the present by a bark from the general.

"They ran, you stood your ground! Well done, young fellow! But have we had the answer that we wanted?"

Dry-mouthed—and dry-crotched; he was surprised he hadn't wet himself—Chodeng stared around. Under the shining mist the villagers were laughing, swapping inaudible jokes, pointing at the fleeing soldiers and imitating with dance-like elaboration the gait of the pack mules. There was a pause like the one between the lightning and the thunder.

During it, he found the pretty girl was shyly gazing at him.

Something said (only it wasn't speech, more like a kind of *wen* inscribed directly on the paper of his awareness, that he understood without having had to study the characters):

#I have long awaited educated persons. These folk are kindly but with minds confined by ignorance. However, now two from your capital city are here I find that one is honored for slaughtering his own kind and the other has spent his life convincing himself of untruths .#

Chodeng set one hand giddily to his forehead. This time he did have to dismount. For a moment he lost contact with reality, so dazzling was it to find he could already (it must be by being taught and how could a dragon, how could a phoenix—

#NEITHER, but it was brave of you to ask the question for it shows you were prepared to entertain the difference of me from you# (convey so much NEW knowledge in less than an eyeblink?) understand the messages arriving directly in his brain. Except that that was wrong and he had no time—

#indicating that I was correct in addressing you the same way I appealed to this girl when, desperately injured, I was driven to issue an emergency signal summoning the inhabitants to abandon all else and tend

my welfare until I began to recover.#

—to analyze because implications were still storming in.

He sought permission to organize his thoughts. Received it.

"You fell to earth among the falling stars."

It marched into consciousness like childhood memories.

"To stay alive you forced these villagers to obey your orders."

A sense of flinching. Then bravado, as it were: #If not I would have died.#

Sudden addition: #How do your people like dying far from home, far from their ancestors' graves?#

For an instant Chodeng was tempted to sympathize. Then, somehow, he stopped. He realized someone else's fingers were grasping his. He was much more accustomed to physical signals than to mental ones.

It was the girl with trousers rolled above her knees who held his hand. Her eyes could not convey clear messages the way this someone from the stars had done within mere moments. (Background; silent shouts like chanting monks, so perfectly in unison their words were always clear. #Do as I say or else I shall die. Do as I say or else I shall die.#) Chodeng had not yet had a girl, though he had lusted after many. On the way he had made what he thought was indirect allusion to the matter when chatting with Bi-tso, and been amazed at how much more casually the old scholar spoke of fucking women and even boys than Pi-li or any other adult in Bu Zhuo.

He was resolved he wouldn't die until he—*had*.

Would this girl here... ? She was, one must admit, extremely pretty...

Yet though she clung with fervor to his hand, pressed it against her breast so that beneath her jacket—it was unquilted—he felt the rounding swell, the hard peak, and he in his turn felt that he was hardening...

#I paid them back for all the help I had required. You need only look around. Were you not led to expect a dry and barren land with people starving on it?#

"Stop!" Chodeng cried aloud. Of a sudden the experience of having instant chunks of knowledge driven into his brain like a forester's wedge being used to split a log became unbearable.

Respite. He found himself exhaling in a gusty sigh.

Cautious, the girl let go his hand and took half a pace to the rear, her large eyes remaining fixed on his face.

"It is different from us," she whispered. He understood at once. Fearing what might happen when he was exposed for the first time to the force of the strange being, to which the villagers had been able to adjust by degrees for at first it had been weak and injured, she had kept him literally in touch with humanness, shameless though she might be called for what she'd done. He felt unspeakably grateful.

But dared not touch her again to show the fact. How could he tell which of the other villagers, who had now assembled close by in a compact crowd, was or might be her father, her mother, her brother, her intended? And already angered by her act of kindness?

Another question sprang to his mind. How were his companions taking all this? One thing was plain: the soldiers were getting over their panic and sullenly recovering the mules and their burdens, though odds and ends had been spilled. Kao-li and his ex-sergeant, the bannerman, were giving them the tongue-lashing of their lives, vying for supremacy in imprecation. Chodeng was secretly impressed.

Bi-tso, however, was looking baffled and unhappy, which bewildered him. Why should not a scholar be overjoyed to encounter a celestial being, though it was neither dragon nor phoenix? Could he not look forward to being remembered for a thousand years as the discoverer of a wholly new type of creature, as famous as the legendary sage who evolved the art of divination from the patterns on a tortoise-shell, or even Fuxi who devised the art of writing? Who could tell what marvels this meeting might portend?

He ventured a question, daring to use the familiar honorific "grandfather." To that extent he had guessed right; Bi-tso took no more offense than if a favorite pupil had employed it—indeed, marked it with a twitch of his mouth that might have been intended for a smile. His answer, however, explained his patent unhappiness.

"It seemed to be trying to tell us"—a momentary hesitation—"that it comes from beyond the realm of the emperor."

Briefly that puzzled Chodeng; then he realized. The emperor was said to rule all under heaven, and the not-dragon-not-phoenix claimed to hail from... Well, the impression that had been planted in his mind felt more like an ocean crossed with a desert but overtones of extreme distance were undeniable. Also it contained stars that not only shone but felt hot. For some reason he found that oddly convincing. Above the sky, then. He looked politely expectant, waiting for the old man to go on.

"And that's impossible!"

"Forgive my duncehood, grandfather, but why?"

"The authorities are agreed on the matter. Therefore the whatever-it-is must be lying. Which further confirms my conclusion. Heavenly beings are incapable of lying." He folded his arms on his chest defiantly. "Which proves my case!"

#I think rather it proves mine.#

This time and from now on the information insinuated itself into Chodeng's mind, rather than being slammed there in one painful chunk.

#They are too rigid for me to communicate with. You are young and open-minded like the girl who has helped me until now. But your party is tired and hungry. I shall withdraw .#

The visitors were organized again, soldiers holding the heads of the mules, the general back beside the scholar, the bannerman hoisting anew his dragon pennant.

"This is my father Tai Yu," said the pretty girl, indicating a man of early middle age with a deeply lined face and a wisp of beard. At some stage she had rolled down her trousers again but her feet were still bare and Chodeng found his gaze being drawn back and back to their shapely natural arches. "He is our headman. My name is Tai Ping. We think you must be tired and hungry. Come with us."

No one commented on the fact but there was no longer any sense of alien presence. The radiance had faded from the air. Yet Chodeng

suspected that the being had not in fact departed. Tai Ping's words were too close to what he had just read/heard within his mind.

In flowery language Bi-tso accepted the offer of hospitality. The general gave a grunt that might be interpreted as concurrence. They headed down the gentle slope between the paddies and entered the village.

This was much like, yet very different from, the imperial party's reception at Bu Zhuo. There was no luxury whatever about the accommodation; they were all to be quartered on planks with straw pads that made Bi-tso groan quietly at sight, though the makeshift huts made vacant for them permitted at least a modicum of privacy through hangings and partitions. There was, by contrast, plenty of water and plenty of fuel. Wooden tubs stood ranked in the open air, the evening being nippy but not cold, and the visitors were invited to strip and climb in while the girls and women poured over them hot water by the bucketful.

Chodeng could not quite decide whether Tai Ping was trying to glimpse his body through the water when she cast down her eyes, or merely being maidenly and modest. Either way, he was glad it proved opaque enough to conceal the visible evidence of her effect on him.

Then bowls of wine were delivered with bows and flourishes, and that had an unexpected consequence. Being scrubbed and massaged by a brawny farmer's wife, Kao-li burst into song and astonished everybody. He had a fine voice, and for so large a man his high notes were remarkable. When he finished there were cries for more.

But Tai Yu smilingly intimated that, as it was nearing sundown, they had better use for their fuel than replenishing the hot tubs yet again and would rather cook dinner. At the prospect of good fresh food the men erupted from the tubs like buffaloes from their wallow, splashing the girls who fled, laughing, some of them not without a backward glance. Tai Ping, Chodeng was glad to see, departed at a stately pace, not turning.

The contrast with Bu Zhuo increased when the meal was served. Here was no porcelain, only brown and in some cases unfired clay pottery, and they had to eat kneeling or squatting. But what was dipped or lifted from grill-racks or from huge old cauldrons was amazing. Even at the end of the rainy season back home, when the best and last of the spring crops were reaching the table, Chodeng had never tasted such delicious food: rice

fresh from the paddy, duck killed and plucked since their arrival, patties stuffed with sweet mashed beans, tea so aromatic that it filled the air like fields of flowers...

Also there was more wine, of which he accepted three bowls. He hadn't tasted it before but he didn't care how soon he tasted it again.

Since these people, or rather their forebears, had been deported to the plateau from a district close to the capital, because—as Tai Ping explained—the Silk Emperor feared they were plotting against him, there was no need for the services of an interpreter. The discussion between the general, the scholar, and the headman threatened to depart into areas where Chodeng would have lacked vocabulary even in his own dialect. For a while he kept up gamely, catching especially references to Bi-tso's mission to find rocks fallen from the sky, if such existed. The locals assured him that they did, and had landed in a gully not far away, but they were of no ordinary stone, for where they were not scorched they were shiny, and of no color there was a name for. Bi-tso declared that he could not wait to establish whether they were merely of some unusual metal or whether they were truly of some celestial substance.

Significantly, though: it was the day following the fall of stars that the not-dragon-not-phoenix first manifested. As the newcomers had already observed, it was unlike ordinary animals, with its penetrable substance and illusory surface. There had been much debate concerning its nature but eventually the people had concluded it must be some kind of ghost.

At first they were very frightened, for it made them do things they did not want. It made them go to the gully and gather the bits of metal. Some claimed they were phoenix eggshell but the being could write directly on their minds and told them not to argue but dig up as many fragments as possible and bring them together. Some were buried quite deep. Hungry and thirsty, they worked at this task daylong until they dropped, and some did not rise again.

But then, one day, they returned from their labors and gasped in astonishment. Water was filling the paddy-ditches at a season when they should have been bone-dry. Almost overnight crops sprouted from nowhere, or perhaps from seeds dormant since last harvest. Frogs, ducks, carp, brought the waterways to life again. All of a sudden life at Gan Han was better than it had ever been.

But no one understood why. What did the distinguished gentlemen from the capital city make of these extraordinary events? Was there a connection? If so, what kind? Some said the being had come from the sky with the metal rocks. Others said it must be a mountain spirit roused by the impact, that had called on the people to dig painful splinters out of its body as one might pick gravel from a graze.

Gravely, Bi-tso reviewed the competing possibilities and added others of his own, and beyond that point Chodeng made no pretense of following.

The presence returned fleetingly to his mind, confirming that although now imperceptible it had never actually departed. He was to do something that might prove very hard, but in return he would be well rewarded. He would even receive some of the reward in advance.

He uttered a soft groan because the wine made it difficult to unravel the message. Clearly it had been aimed at him alone, for the older men were chatting as before and even Tai Ping assumed a mistaken reason for his reaction.

Taking his hand, she helped him to his feet and led him away. They moved through near darkness, their departure unremarked because throughout the evening people had been coming and going from the need to relieve themselves. Even Tai Yu paid no attention.

Thirty paces distant, her face inscrutable albeit visible because despite the absence of a moon the air was crystalline and there were sharp and vivid stars, she opened the front of his trousers with soft and gentle fingers. He had never had this service performed for him by a girl before, nor even heard of it being done. But he liked it. He liked it very much.

Except that by the time he finished awareness of where her hand was resting did as much to end the flow as the exhaustion of his bladder.

There was the echo of an echo of a complex medley of thoughts: a hint of satisfaction, of calculation, of exhaustion... But the wine still made these impressions hard to analyze.

Without a word Tai Ping led him not back to the feasters but toward the largest and most solid house—her home, presumably. By now the night was chill, and during the brief walk the fumes of wine cleared from his head.

Then strangeness happened.

Even though at every step his bodily condition reminded him how close he was coming to fulfillment of his ambition, to graduating from boyhood to manhood, he could not help thinking of how her father, any father, would react were he to wake one day and find his daughter lying with a strange man...

She opened the door. She stood aside and gestured him to enter. He caught her arm and swung her round so that the starlight shone full on her face.

Her cheeks were glistening. Down each there ran a narrow shiny runnel. He touched a finger to the left one, licked its tip and tasted salt.

After a small eternity he whispered, "You don't really want to do this, do you?"

Wordlessly she bowed her head.

#Do it. This is the pay in advance I promised to Chodeng.#

If a human had spoken, one would have said the words escaped involuntarily. As Chodeng digested the implications he became aware of so to say marginal glosses that enabled him to better understand the snatch he had caught a few moments before: plan made, so far carried out, lessening of vigor... Beyond that: stranded, error, violence, fury at the resistance of this soft inferior ignorant... There was almost no end to that one.

But Chodeng was left with one overriding conviction. It was unbecoming to corrupt a respectable girl against her will.

Something that could coerce human beings with its mere thoughts and wanted to spend Tai Ping as though she were a string of cash... Oh, it must be worse than any emperor! Worse even than one who could deport whole townful of people to a barren plateau for conspiring to overthrow his rule!

Not uttering a word, he stumbled away.

And, seconds later, realized he did not know which way to head. He had

expected to locate the feast again by ear, but everything was eerily quiet, as though the company had finished and dispersed.

At a loss, he turned back. There Ping stood before her home, in an oddly stiff posture. Only her arms were moving. She was unbuttoning her jacket, opening it, discarding it, bringing her hands to the waistband of her trousers...

Yet the expression on her face was as vacant as a doll's.

#I cannot be mistaken. All my conclusions agree. The reproductive drive in humans as young as this is uncontrollable especially if they have never enjoyed the experienced.#

She and he in the same moment cried out with the impact. He rushed toward her, seized her in his arms. Her skin was deathly cold. She clung to him, trying not to sob.

A blurt of petulance: #They must obey/help. They are the ones that must understand. The old folk here are content to call me ghost or devil. The newcomers believe they are well informed but what they know is either nonsensical or shameful. These have to be the ones! *Do as you're told!*#

This time the shock was giddyng.

Yet it also conveyed an indefinable implication of fatigue. Chodeng somehow retained his feet. The girl turned away from his body, but kept his arm around her bare shoulders by grasping his hand, seeming to draw comfort from his presence. Side by side they stared in the direction of the gully where Tai Yu had said they would go tomorrow to see the objects from the sky.

The luminance like a saint's nimbus was back in the air. Now, however, it was so faint it could not have been discerned by daylight.

By degrees Chodeng's raging thoughts calmed. At length, as though expecting to be heard at that not inconsiderable distance (and indeed, should one not expect it wherever the radiance displayed?), he spoke aloud.

"Honorable creature, not dragon as I thought, not phoenix as the

respected Bi-tso declared, I respectfully inquire: are you listening?"

There was a response of sorts: weak, sullen, resigned? He could not tell which element held the balance. He spoke on regardless.

"We obey the emperor who rules all under heaven. It is unseemly for any person save him to give us orders except with imperial authority."

He was vaguely aware that at his side Ping was brightening. She squeezed the hand she was clutching in front of her shoulder.

"For all we know there may be other creatures in other realms, but surely they must owe allegiance to rulers of their own."

This time the response was something closer to a sigh. Of despair? He didn't want to think about that possibility, and hurried on.

"I think you must have been hurt because you were caught among stones as they fell from the sky, as one wading in a river may be hurt when rain looses rocks from the bank. I think you want to return where you came from but cannot do so without further assistance. I am certain that even the emperor would agree you have well repaid the people of Gan Han for saving your life. But you ought to have asked for what you need instead of trying to bribe me with the body of this girl."

She not only tugged his hand again but drew it lower to where his fingers could close on the bare skin of her breast. With her other hand she pressed it there, so he might be sure it was no mistake. He had done and said the proper thing.

How to conclude? Inspiration dawned.

"Having been honored by speaking with the scholar Bi-tso on my way here, a man I hold in high regard even though you think he has wasted his life learning about rubbish, I feel I am acting correctly. I trust the help you seek will be forthcoming. I shall do what little a nobody like myself can, to hasten it. But now I am tired and my companion is not only cold, she is half-naked, and I wish to return her garments. If you sleep, sleep well. In the morning my superiors will call on you and I will abide by their decision. Good night."

During that unintended, completely spur-of-the-moment speech

Chodeng had sensed a change in himself. In a totally different way from what he had expected, he felt he had made the transition. He had begun this trip as a boy. Here he stood, as the stars wheeled past the midnight conformation and brought the world closer to the onset of another day, with the right to call himself a man.

He picked up Ping's jacket and helped her don it. Then turned away, prepared to sleep in the open if he could not find the lodging assigned to him.

Astonishingly, there was no need. Ghost-silently emerging from the half-open door of his home, here came the headman Tai Yu.

"Father!" Tai Ping snapped instantly back to life, rushing forward to embrace him. "Chodeng has been wonderful! He defied the—"

He cut her short. "Daughter, I heard what he said."

But—!

It had just occurred to Chodeng that he had addressed the being in his own dialect, and these people were not supposed to understand it, this being why his recruitment as interpreter had proved a nullity.

Yet—

He bit back the objection. Let the Dao unfold as it must. The headman was saying, "You refused the pleasure of my daughter's body even though, as I well know, she could not have resisted had you chosen otherwise. Enter my humble house. What we can offer in the way of comfort you shall have."

Giddy and confused, even though the last trace of the wine had long burned out of his system, he complied, and moments later was asleep.

In the morning;

Accompanied by the whole population of the village save the very old, the very young and the infirm, the imperial party—including Chodeng—trudged under a bright morning sky along a well-worn track toward the gully where strange shiny fragments lay scattered.

With her father's entire approval, Ping walked at his side.

As they went, Chodeng sought that curious radiance in the air. Now and then he thought he detected it; then again, a pace further on, he was sure he had deceived himself. At last Ping asked what was troubling him; he explained; and she nodded.

"Yes, it grows weak again. It was like this at first, after the rocks fell. It grew strong. Now it is as you feel."

How could this have anything to do with himself? Yet Chodeng could not escape the conviction that it was in some way his *fault*.

They crested a final rise, and while the accustomed locals continued onward the strangers halted in amazement. The descriptions they had heard yesterday had not prepared them for the spectacle of this narrow valley strewn end to end and side to side with gleaming masses. Where they were not scorched they threw back light and images, so that for a moment the soldiers gasped about ghosts and devils.

Then they saw there were only reflections of themselves from curved surfaces, polished as mirrors. But they remained unhappy, and no wonder.

Tai Yu had halted and was looking around in confusion. Weak but clear, a message was being written (again the image of *wen*, the script shared by all imperial citizens regardless of what dialect they spoke) on their awareness, but this time it was at close range and aimed at all of them whether or not they understood the implications.

#Chodeng is correct. I was caught among a storm of flying rocks the other side of your sky. Arriving in your world I could think of nothing else but staying alive .#

The radiance that had been so faint gathered strength anew. This time, however, they sensed it was not in itself the creature they were "listening" to, but only some kind of projection. The image came to them of the emperor's power: he himself did not have to be present for his subjects to obey him.

#Last night I was taught that you understand more than I assumed.#

Chodeng strove to remember what he had said and done, but the only

reality remaining from that strange cold hour was the strong warmth of Ping's fingers intertwined with his.

#When I ordered you to help I could think of nothing except survival. When I regained enough strength I thought to pay you back by making your streams full and your paddies fruitful.#

There were nods of cautious approval.

#Beyond that it was my intention to make you bring hither goldsmiths and other skilled workers in metal, who might with guidance repair what some of you took for the shell of a phoenix egg. Alas, I'm afraid in all my voyages I never met a phoenix.#

Ping gave Chodeng a sidelong glance. He realized they were sharing the same thought, a sense that this creature was rather engaging, whatever might be its nature.

And a second later wondered: *In its presence, can either of us be sure we are thinking our own thoughts?*

#It was my conviction that if they worked under my direction hard enough and long enough to repair my conveyance, they would retain such advanced skills as to make the Middle Kingdom the pre-eminent power among all the nations into which you ill-advisedly divide your species. We used to make mistakes like that until we devised the means of communication I am now employing. And—here is one of the factors that made me change my mind—I find you have some grasp of the need for superior communication. Even though you have to waste far too much of your youth learning it, *wen* at least foreshadows the solution.#

Chodeng saw Bi-tso bristle at the suggestion his lifelong studies might have been less than comprehensive. As for the general, he was gnawing the ends of his moustache.

#Without help I shall very shortly die. I could constrain you, even now, to obey me, but I would rather not, for exactly the reason that in the early hours of this morning a young man of your party declined to lose his virginity, which he despises, at the expense of a young woman who has been brought up to prize it. I thought because of your wars and your armies and your generals there was little hope of your species becoming civilized.

#I was wrong, and that is why I now come forth before you. Not a dragon, not a phoenix, not any creature from the domain your emperor lays claim to: "all under heaven"! Wait.#

The last injunction was superfluous. Not a man or woman, not a youth or girl, who had assembled in this valley scattered with amazing shiny artifacts not belonging to this world, could have done otherwise even for a single heartbeat than to stare as, seemingly from living rock, that which had been addressing them emerged.

Clutching Ping's hand so hard she winced and slacked his grip, Chodeng saw...

What was he seeing? He remembered his conviction that he could not walk on his own feet to where the being was. And realized he was watching it make the opposite journey. From that elsewhere place where it could survive in solid rock it was emerging... and there was this sense that the emergence cost appalling effort... and—

And for the shortest, shortest moment, there it was.

And it was wrong. It was not. Not even phoenix, not even dragon. Simply not.

"Kill it," grunted Kao-li, and tugged the reins to turn his horse away. The soldiers rushed with spears and swords.

"But why?" Chodeng screamed at Bi-tso, who looked on with stony eyes.

"It lied by claiming to hail from heaven. Celestial beings do not lie. Also it has usurped the imperial privilege of directing forced labor. These crimes are sufficient to justify execution."

With surprising expertise he wheeled his horse and rode off in the general's wake. It was vain for Chodeng and Tai Ping to shout after him.

The color of the being's blood was other than red.

When it had been decided, owing to that unwholesome and unprecedented color, not to butcher the thing for its meat but leave it for the crows and buzzards (though they had not yet shown their usual interest), and after the proposal that suddenly erupted about offering

these shiny oddments to the current emperor as phoenix eggshell, thereby purchasing a pardon and enabling return to their forebears' home, was just as swiftly met with the retort that life in Gan Han bid fair to become far better, with more rice, more fruit, more ducks, more wine—

Then they realized that those already in sight of the village had faltered to a straggling halt. Many were turning back, tears pouring down their faces. Some were beating their foreheads on the ground, tearing their hair, uttering curses, accusing each other of nameless faults and crimes.

Even before he and Ping forced their way to a point from which they could look down on what yesterday had been well-irrigated fertile ground, Chodeng had a premonition of what the vanguard had already seen.

There was no water in the ditches. There was no rice in the fields. There was brown cracked mud in the midst of which two sad crippled ducks quacked desperation at the sky.

And the latter discoursed eloquently, in a *wen* of sharp pure blue, about the long wait that impended till the autumn rains.

Tai Yu went mad. Chodeng took his daughter to Bu Zhuo and married her. But neither mentioned Gan Han again. •

However, in the upshot nothing out of the ordinary occurred.

—"Annals of the Middle Kingdom," scroll XXIII