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Post by a Thousand Cuts: Hotel of Magical Thinking



Fig. 1. *Les Supplices Chinois*. 1912.

At the turn of the twentieth century, foreign visitors to China could purchase postcards with photographs or illustrations of Chinese tortures (*Les Supplices Chinois*) and mail them home. This particular artifact (fig. 1) from 1912 depicts a man being executed by *linchi* (凌遲 “slow slicing,” or death by a thousand cuts). Photographs of *linchi*, such as those on postcards, would leave Georges Bataille horrified and ecstatic, as he confesses his obsession with the “young and secutive [*jeune et séduisant*] Chinese man.” Bataille’s insight into the commingling of horror and ecstasy, pain and pleasure, is here facilitated by a postal system from the East; in fact, he completes this geo- and temporal-circuit of love.

The *linchi* postcard invokes, for me, the image of cannibalistic Mongols in Matthew Paris’s thirteenth-century *chornica maiora* (fig. 2). (Are not illuminated chronicles postcards from the past?) One of the achievements of medieval Tartars was their efficient postal and lodging system. Marco Polo, in his *Travels*, notes the lavish hostels that play host to foreign ambassadors and merchants in the fabled city of Cambalac. Radiating from the imperial center is a network of post-stations that serve the messengers in the Great Khan’s efficient postal system. At every post, called *yam*, is a “palatial hostelry” worthy of royalties. And like Polo, Gaspar da Cruz was later fascinated by China’s postal network and described its horses as “swyfte of foote.” But while

missionaries travelled through post-stations, European writers moved Serra—as Cathay, as Tartary—away from history and into romance. Spenser’s Tartars dwell in Fairy Land, and Ariosto’s Ruggiero rides a griffin, evocative of Chaucer’s flying brass steed, “sopra il gran Quinsai.” Shakespeare’s Puck, like postal couriers, moves “swifter than arrow from the Tartar’s bow.” In the eastward drift that collapses historical, racial, and geographical differences, trade is sublimated into fetishes, and Cathay is transformed into an imagined community of Orientalized courtliness. Oberon, in *Huon de Bourdeaux*, grants Arthur “all the fayryes . . . of Tartare.” When Milton’s Adam surveys “Paquin of Sinæan Kings,” the quest for the Northeast Passage has end in prophecies of modern imperialism—in fairies’ bower.



Fig. 2. Matthew Paris, *Chronica Maiora II*. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS. 16, f. 167r.

The photocard depicting *linchi* is a form of magical thinking, or rather, magical feeling. Bataille’s responses—as *envois*—are symptomatic of his impulse to collapse medieval technology of hagiography (with its figurations of eroticized saints in pain) and modern *dispositif* of enchantment. The young Chinese man on the 1912 postcard is a courier of history: his is a dismembered body of the cannibal, the messenger, the fairy, the criminal, and the saint. Curiously, the Mongolian *yam* was also understood by Western travellers to mean a “Manager of Postal Relay Stations.” The term is therefore both a body and an architectural structure. Bataille’s young man is *yam*; his postcard is hotel consciousness compressed, stamped, and delivered.