

The Hasselblad Letters

Dear Sir or Madam,

My apologies for the salutation ambiguity, but your letter neglected to suggest a gender. I nevertheless thank you for your enquiry.

Your query is correct in its assumption.

On the ancient trade route that once traversed southern Asia there was indeed a pass known as the Tou-Pa. The pass still exists today, but is now rarely used.

At one time the Tou-Pa was the border between the Daw-Ging kingdom to its north and the Quon-Lie kingdom to its south; and for the traders wishing to journey to and from the T'and Dynasty in what is now known as China, it was one of their safest routes. For generations the pass had been used by travellers, but as you have quite rightly assessed, the T'and records indicate that in the middle of the ninth century, for a short period of time, this gateway became solidly closed and only gradually reopened several years later. Records from within the Daw-Ging and Quon-Lie kingdoms also start to become fragmented at this time, eventually ceasing altogether half a century later.

To further assist you, as also requested, what follows is a short account of the reasons why.

Part way along the Tou-Pa is a small side valley that, uniquely, allowed the border guards from both the Daw-Ging and Quon-Lie kingdoms to survive in this otherwise barren mountain environment. This valley was to play an important part in the future events that unfolded here. Another key factor seems to have been that the original guards brought with them their families and on both sides, in later generations guards were procured from these same families. Whether this was a privilege or a punishment is unknown, but it had the effect of setting in motion a unique bond within this originally divided village that over time formed itself into a single entity. What was to eventually come forth from the Tou-Pa suggests that amongst these guards and their families there were people of intelligence, literacy, and wisdom.

The official border between the Daw-Ging and Quon-Lie kingdoms was primarily the small stream that ran from this side valley and then divided to flow in both directions along the Tou-Pa pass itself. The process of crossing from one kingdom to the next was all very formalised and ritualistic. First a traveller would have to submit their papers and declare any trade goods which would then be physically verified by the border guards, after which, the traveller would walk the few paces across the stream into the other kingdom where the whole procedure was repeated in exactly the same way. Both sets of guards would have appeared sternly separate and outwardly authoritative towards their respective kingdoms.

However, from writings that have survived from within the border post itself, it appears this became a game to the guards. The writings indicate that when there were no travellers the guards and their families, from both kingdoms, started to intermingle.

They began to sit around the same warming fires, laugh at the same jokes, and tell the same stories that were then passed on to following generations in the same way. From these writings it is clear that from early on in this forced mountain settlement these people - who came from two different societies - began without intent to meld themselves into one cohesive entity.

I suspect that to begin with, this probably came out of the necessity to survive in this mountain pass to which they had all been sent. When the supplies from one kingdom didn't arrive on time, the guards and their families from the other kingdom shared their food, knowing that if they did so, their generosity would be reciprocated at a later time. Eventually even - although it seems this was

never widely broadcast on either side when officialdom travelled into the pass - these people from two separate backgrounds began to intermarry. Based on the evidence available, as far as officialdom from either kingdom was concerned, the border remained as sacrosanct and secure as it had always been. With this in mind, it may have been these two factors that formed the basis upon which these two, originally quite separate groups of families - some decades later - stepped aside from the conflict that was to unfold between their kingdoms.

In the year eight thirty one, it was into this hidden world within the Tou-Pa that news came of the Great-Lord of Daw-Ging's death and that a new Great-Lord had been invested. Things altered little at first. Life went on unchanged even when news came that the new Great-Lord had ordered an enormous silo to be built at the centre of the Daw-Ging kingdom. Along with fodder and grains of all sorts, it was to be filled with nuts and many different kinds of dried fruits. The estimated quantity needed to fill the silo was eight entire harvests. The Great-Lord had stated that it was to stand as a barrier against the dry times that everyone knew would come again as they had in the past.

At the time, even at the border, no one realised the consequences such a scheme would set in motion. Goods to fill the silo were to come from already taxed commodities, which meant there would be less tax to fund other necessities as the new Great-Lord had stated there was to be no increased burden placed upon his people to fund and fill the venture. Instead he would lessen finance to the defence of the realm because mutual survival had been assured through trade with neighbours and such defence was no longer needed. Food supplies still came to the Daw-Ging border guards, but as elsewhere in the kingdom, armaments were left to decline.

What the new Great-Lord of the Daw-Ging failed to understand and take into account, was a drought already starting to impact upon the southern edge of the Quon-Lie kingdom on the other side of the Tou-Pa. In Quon-Lie there was also a new Great-Lord struggling to find his own way to rule. He started funnelling food south from his northern provinces in order to alleviate starvation breaking out in the south. With this he hoped to quell any unrest that could eventuate from such a disaster. Over the following years though, the drought expanded until the provinces that needed assistance outnumbered those capable of helping.

Watching these two, still, quite separate events unfolding to either side in the Daw-Ging and Quon-Lie kingdoms, were the border guards of the Tou-Pa. Showing great foresight in their understanding of what they saw developing around them, this small border settlement decided to build their own silo, which they then constructed in a hidden part of the little side valley behind their village. As it turned out, it seems they had correctly surmised that if they did nothing their own survival in these changing times would become disturbingly unpredictable.

So it was that in the year eight forty, just as the Tou-Pa villagers had feared, the Great-Lord of Quon-Lie (in what can only be described as an act of desperation having watched his financial reserves steadily decline through the purchasing of food from surrounding kingdoms) formed his people into a military force and marched north towards the still prosperously fertile, but now defensively weakened, Daw-Ging.

At the border the Quon-Lie forces found the border village deserted, and upon entering out into the Daw-Ging thought they had found the reason why. Before them lay devastation. As far as their eyes could see the Daw-Ging's fertility had been razed to the ground. Crops had been burnt, fruiting trees uprooted and most of the dwellings demolished in order to leave no sustenance whatsoever for the invading army.

A surviving Quon-Lie parchment notes this and surmised that the Daw-Ging contingent of the border village, in order to allow no advanced warning to the invading army, must have taken the Quon-Lie contingent prisoner and fled north along with the rest of the Daw-Ging inhabitants of the region.

In reality, with a proper investigation this would have been seen to be blatantly incorrect. The devastation he saw before him however had obviously rattled the Great-Lord of the Quon-Lie, and in hope of overtaking the destruction he forced his host forward without delay.

As the Quon-Lie army marched north, smoke continued to rise before them. They found no livestock either as these also had been herded north by the local inhabitants. What the Quon-Lie did find upon reaching the Daw-Ging capital were some of the biggest and strongest walls any of them had ever seen.

The siege that followed lasted just over two years, and in the end, the Great-Lord of Quon-Lie was forced to retreat. Demoralised, his forces began to disintegrate as word filtered through that fertility was slowly returning to the north of their homeland and even in the south the drought seemed to be on the wane. In the year eight forty three, the Great-Lord of Quon-Lie finally took the last of his force back through the mountains to a land that, in his absence, had begun to fragment.

As the invaders departed, the Great-Lord of Daw-Ging was once again able to open the gates to his city, but his people too were demoralised having nearly eaten through their entire store of food.

I wonder if the Great-Lord of Quon-Lie had known how close he was to success at that point, just how history might have then developed.

But he didn't, and it was to eventuate that neither of these kingdoms ever recovered from this folly. Both Great-Lords found themselves disgraced; their authority questioned, and in the following years both their kingdoms disintegrated around them.

At the border though, things were different. As the last of the Quon-Lie armies retreated through the pass, the border guards and their families emerged from their siloed refuge to re-establish their settlement. At first things were hard for them as support no longer came from either Kingdom. But as the regions at both ends of the Tou-Pa began to repopulate, the returning people saw how the Tou-Pa villagers had stayed united and began to come to them for advice and to sort out problems. In return these people offered up support to the village.

As the pass once again became known as a safe trade route, the village of Tou-Pa decided, in order to lessen their dependence on the surrounding region, that they would levy their own small transit tax in return for a guarantee of safe passage. Eventually, as the area of land they were able to guarantee protection over grew, their tax intake also increased respectively.

Strangely, the path that led me to uncover this story began during a trip through Italy some years ago while researching another story entirely. While in Venice I had cause to visit the vaulted archives of the Venetian Institute of Italian History, where, to my utter delight, I came across a traveller's journal from the thirteenth century.

On a page marked - 28th of June 1281 - I read the following passage:

This mountain kingdom of Tou-Pa has, thus far, lasted for four hundred and thirty eight years, and has been ruled over by the same tightly interlocked group of families all this time. Situated on the south Asian trade route, each of its ruling families rule their own province under their own flag; however, on each of their individual standards, the main image is one of a small storage silo on the side of a high mountain valley. This depiction is said to represent the beginnings from which this gentle, but fiercely protective Kingdom first arose.

Regrettably, the Tou-Pa kingdom has now also slipped from the world's history and is perhaps another story for another time as I believe the above answers your question. If by chance you do wish to know more, do not hesitate to contact me again.

Yours sincerely,

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Director General

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