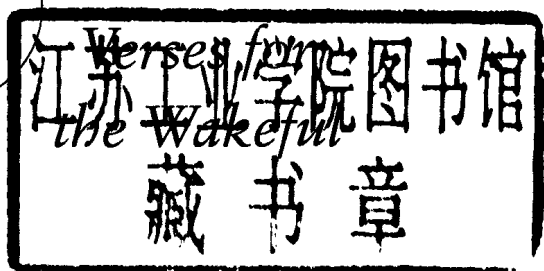


# Sleepless Nights

*Verses for  
the Wakeful*

*Translated by*  
Thomas Cleary

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*Sleepless Nights: Verses for the Wakeful*

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## Introduction

In the early decades of the thirteenth century, Genghis Khan led a confederacy of Mongol tribes out of the steppes of Central Asia to conquer northern China, Turkistan, Transoxania, and Afghanistan, further extending his raids into Persia and eastern Europe. Under the leadership of Genghis' sons and grandsons, the Mongol Empire swallowed the rest of China and established khanates in Turkistan, Persia, and Russia. Apart from those slain in combat, it has been estimated that as many as 30 million people died at the hands of the Mongol hordes.

This book of verses is translated from a huge collection of poetry written by a refugee who lived through this cataclysmic era. The author, whose name was Wen-siang, was born in China in 1210, just before Genghis Khan invaded north China to wrest it from the control of the Jurchen overlords, earlier usurpers. Nearly seventy when Genghis' grandson Kublai overthrew the Southern Sung dynasty, Wen-siang lived for at least another eight years, under the regime of the Mongol conquerors.

Wen-siang's poetry gives voice to the sufferings and the hopes of a people groaning under the weight of history, the conscripts, the peasants, the women, and the refugees. He was an independent Buddhist wayfarer, a pacifist, a feminist, a cosmopolitan rustic; once a political prisoner in his own homeland, he was thereafter a lifelong exile and wanderer. Here translated into English for the first time, his writings mock the folly of tyrants and celebrate the

indomitability of life. Full of pathos and beauty, they are among the greatest masterpieces of secular Buddhist poetry.

One of the ironies of literary history is that the individuals known to the world as the greatest poets of China, a land where poetry was regarded as a high art, were in reality disciples and followers of even greater masters, Ch'an poets whose subtle artistry went through and beyond the aesthetic into higher realms of experience hardly susceptible to expression in any other way. Even the most intelligent scholars and writers of China in its golden age could barely follow the wizardry of the Ch'an poets, and this is why, strange to say, the greatest poets and the greatest poetry of China are virtually unknown even in their homeland.

The art of translating Ch'an poetry has never been public knowledge, and is not taught in schools, present or past. Some university scholars today have even expressed the opinion that the symbolic language of Ch'an does not exist. The Ch'an reply would be that this is due to ignorance, confusion, and consequent insensitivity, resulting in an approach to the subject that is much like scratching your shoe to relieve an itching foot.

The selection of the poems presented here in translation for the first time reflects special meanings for the present day, as well as perennial themes for all seasons. To speak of these directly, outside the poetry itself, would be an affront to the delicacy of the issues, the sensitivities of the reader, and, of course, the subtleties of the work itself.

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# Sleepless Nights



## A Long Journey

Far, far, a journey of ten thousand miles;  
green, green, the riverbank grasses.  
The green green grasses fade and die out,  
but the long long journey never ends.

Once Ch'in had destroyed the six states of old,  
it drove the people to build the Great Wall.  
A great wall stretching thousands of miles  
against the warriors of the north.

The sand and water by the wall are so cold  
my horse cries sadly when I take it to drink.

The men who built the wall  
were exhausted by the toil;  
who did not miss his homeland?  
They thought of their care for their parents,  
and grieved for the families they left alone.

If they died on the site,  
their whitened bones  
stuck up in the void,  
their tallow and blood  
fertilized the meadows,  
and their souls wandered desolate.  
How miserable the builders of the wall;  
they raised their shovels with no joyous song.

If protected by humaneness,  
a country is naturally secure;

but inhumanity spreads calamity.  
The ancestors did not know  
wanton violence to make people toil.  
The ghosts of the high luminaries  
look into their rooms.

The Way of Heaven always dislikes fullness:  
The Great Wall was uselessly made so high—  
it did not save Ch'in from collapse.  
How can that compare to the rulers of  
    antiquity  
who presided over peace without effort?  
Perfect virtue is eternal;  
its grandeur cannot be named.

*The Great Wall of China was built by the Ch'in dynasty (246–206 B.C.E.), the first imperial dynasty of the Chinese empire, set up by the militarized state of Ch'in after it had destroyed the other major states of ancient feudal China. The short-lived Ch'in dynasty is notorious as a reign of terror, during which countless people died from war, execution, and forced labor on government projects.*

## Song of the Wife of a Soldier at War

Parted as a newlywed,  
like a heroine of yore,  
she wonders if it wouldn't be better  
had she not married him before.  
Her husband's away at the northern wars  
for a long time now;  
the geese come south, but no word is heard.

The empty bedroom lonely,  
the cold nights are long.  
The ravaged road goes on and on,  
her distant dreams alone.

They say the Taoists  
can shrink the earth;  
her foolish heart  
would seek that magic charm.

## Feelings on a Journey

Suffering for lack of resources to live in the  
mountains,

I've become a traveler thousands of miles  
away.

I'm unable to meet my brothers, both parents  
are going gray.

No letters come from my old gardens,  
threads of sadness gather day and night.  
Then the roots of dry grasses filling the yard  
suddenly change again to new green.

## Composed in a Dream

Why grieve at being abandoned?  
Poverty and lowliness are not afflictions.  
Walking by the mountains and rivers  
quite suits the hermit's feelings.  
No cars come to my cottage door;  
green moss fills the long pathway.  
Suddenly hearing the fisherfolk's song,  
I'm moved with the happiness of rivers and  
lakes.



## Sleeping Early

In cold weather I always go to sleep early,  
not waiting for the sunlight to withdraw.  
I never shut my cottage door,  
lest it keep the mountain monkeys out.  
Falling leaves strike the window;  
at my pillow it seems like raindrops.  
Rising, I gaze at the western peaks;  
the moon has set, the stars are twinkling.