

# The Jesus Family in Communist China - Part 3

by Dr. D. Vaughan Rees

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*Dr. D. Vaughan Rees explores the resilience and faith of the Ye-su Chia-ting Christians in the face of Communist oppression in China.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 37:5, Psalm 107:7, Psalm 139:3, Mark 12:43, John 10:10

**Topics:** "Communist Persecution", "Faith Triumphs"

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## Description

Dr. D. Vaughan Rees preaches about how the Ye-su Chia-ting Christians were prepared for the Communist rule, showcasing Divine guidance in their lives and how they unknowingly anticipated many Communist objections to Christianity. The sermon highlights the unmistakable path the Lord prepared for them, focusing on their communal living, Sunday observance, education, family life, welfare work, and agriculture, demonstrating how their faith and love triumph over coercion and Communist theories.

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## Transcript

The Communists Anticipated Thou compassest my path and my lying down (Ps. 139:3). Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass (Ps. 37:5). He led them forth by the right way (Ps. 107:7). Much that I have told in the previous two chapters suggests how the Ye-su Chia-ting were being prepared for the ordeal that lay ahead of them. When the crisis of Communist rule came, they found in many ways that Divine guidance had prepared them for the new circumstances, and that they had all-unknowingly anticipated many of the Communists' main objections to Christianity in practice.

In this chapter I wish to show how the Lord was unmistakably preparing their path. Their formative years were in the 20's. God's plan began to take shape in the 30's. My wife and I first met them in the early 30's in the extreme North-West province of China, called Kansu. I stayed with them in MaChuang, their headquarters in the North-Eastern province of Shantung, between 1947 and 1949. At the end of my enforced stay it was thrilling to look back as I said good-bye at the station some miles away.

Mr. Ching took my hand and said, "Little did I think, my brother in 1930, how the Lord would lead, and what He had in store for us. How foolish and ignorant I was. Now see what He has done. He raised us up for this purpose, that the Communists might see what Christianity is." H Heng-shin and I squeezed into the crowded third-class compartment, the whistle blew and we parted, in all human probability not to meet again until we stand before our Lord, theirs and ours. In Shanghai I soon had a Communist exit permit and embarked for Hong Kong.

As we sailed down the China coast a young Chinese refugee said to me: "Doesn't Christianity tell us to sell what we have and give to the poor? And Communism says much the same, when it condemns private ownership. Isn't that so?" "Partly," was my reply, "but the great and fundamental difference is this. I can sell what I have and give it to the poor, but I cannot force you to do it. If I were a Communist I could." The Chinese are clever and nimble-minded. Thus they saw immediately the question of the Communist use of force, and its ultimate end in dictatorship.

A Communist once said to me, "Dictatorship is necessary for the present, but our children and grandchildren will reap the benefits, for then dictatorship will have been swept away." Nemesis has descended upon those who have "darkened counsel with words without knowledge." Quite apart from the very naive attitude toward the lust for power that is inherent in human nature, this statement reminds of one that a noted rationalist used to make: "The Christians would put off our Heaven until the future; I want mine now."

Where p51 Communism has seized power and atheism rules, the folly of this has become apparent. There is no Heaven under Communist rule, except for the Christian, who by his peace shows that he already enjoys it although he waits for it in the future as well. When I first had the opportunity of observing the Communists who came in groups to the compound, I noticed they were in a truculent fighting mood. Their attitude invariably was. We will show these Christians what a true life of equality is.

Among us there are no leaders, everyone is a comrade." One day a typical group of them came and called loudly for the pastor. (They did not give him this title, but Chiachang; this is often used and means Head of the House). I saw him in the distance. He was pushing the manure cart, and he pushed it right into their midst before someone said, "Here he is." The Communists had drawn back from the offensive cart. They then wanted to know how he could keep adequate discipline, when he did such a menial job. (It is of course the lowest coo1ie's job).

Chow-shin-ming, the pastor and official head of the community, explained that since they were all equal, he the leader had the privilege of doing the worst jobs. The Communist looked sheepish. They knew that their theories of equality were not working while here was an obvious demonstration that those of the Christians were. Where they had failed, the despised Christians had succeeded. The Chinese Communists boast of their land tenure theories, "They are better than those of either Marx or Lenin; we are going to change the Russians," said a Peking professor of Chemistry to me.

How have these Christians p52 dealt with some of their land problems? The most important thing is that anyone who wishes to be a leader among them must first have sold his land and given it to the poor, with all his other belongings. I have yet to hear of a Communist who has done this, although I have heard of many who are not Communists who have. But this is something that has been forced on the land-owners of China by torture and death. These Christians had done it before ever the Communists arrived.

A Communist remarked on how fit they looked, robust and rosy-checked. He inferred that they ate well and therefore had large holdings of land. His questions followed, "How many acres have you? What is your food?" Heng-shin was the one questioned and he replied, "We have forty-three acres among five hundred people." The Communist was amazed; "Less than one-tenth of an acre per person!" How could it be! He knew that only land culture and frugality of the highest order could manage on this.

In Shantung the Communists allowed one acre per person as the minimum. They divided land into five categories for taxing, the average yield over several years fixing the grade. The Ye-Su Chia-ting paid no

taxes, or did not up to 1950; it follows that their land must therefore have been of the lowest grade. This was an anomaly which may have been adjusted since, for though their area was low grade land, their yearly yield far exceeded the average. "Fancy," said the local people, "they are so poor they don't pay taxes."

Their food, though adequate, was greatly despised. "Copy the Chia-ting in everything but their food," was a local byword. The Communists boast of their philanthropy, but it is a p53 poor thing compared with Christian giving. This reminds me of a story that appeared in the Nineteenth Century magazine: Huxley in a letter to Gladstone spoke slightly of General Booth and the Salvation Army slum schemes. "The slum schemes of the Rationalistic Association will be far better than anything that Booth and his Army can do," he said.

Nearly one hundred years have gone by. Where are the slum schemes of the Rationalistic Association? The Communists have philanthropic schemes too. One was boasting of these while I was at MaChuang, and asked these Christians how much they gave away. "Nine-tenths of our produce," was the astounding reply. This was too much for the Communist, and too much for me also! So at the first opportunity I drew Heng-shin aside and asked him, "What do you mean, when you said that this year you gave away nine-tenths?"

"It's like this," he said. "In 1930 we began to tithe; in this way we continued for over ten years. In 1942 there was great famine and there were so many starving people, that we felt we should add a tenth. The Lord so blessed us, that we felt the next year we could not stop there, and so every year since we have added a tenth; this this year we are giving away nine-tenths." I asked, "What have you been giving me to eat?" "Just what the Lord sends you," was his reply. "You pray the Lord's Prayer, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' dont' you?"

"So that's it," was all I could reply. It was obvious that I was being carried along on the p54 impetus gained from their faith. What can the Communists do with devotion such as this? Since I left Red China I have received letters from both Miss Helen Tso and Dr. Bessie Chen. One sentence will suffice: "We thought we would have nothing to eat today, and only water to drink, but the Lord has been good to us and given us hoodoo" (gruel to which they add edible weeds). The question arises, if their farming is so efficient, how can they be brought to this pass?

They have learned the vitamin content and calorific value of most things that are edible, including for obvious reasons weeds and spring tree-shoots. And they have done this for the mysterious reason that they give away all they have. Amazing fact, this year they have tithed themselves up to ten-tenths of the produce of their farms! "And He . . . saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they . . . for all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living" (Mark 12:43,44).

Fellow-Christians, show me devotion like that and you have shown me something that will conquer the world. No more need for conferences on how to combat Communism! I have just been reading through a brochure on Communism, which took a committee of a certain church two years to compile, I sit back and consider it, meditating. How mixed and confused are my reactions to it! Then I read that letter from Dr. Bessie Chen and I am thrilled. "O God, let me do something like that," I say instinctively, p55 with my whole being aglow. CHAPELS AND SUNDAY OBSERVANCE

The keeping of Sunday is particularly disliked by the Communists, and church buildings used only for worship are special objects of their scorn. Excuses are made for getting rid of both Sunday and the buildings. That the chapels of these indigenous groups have been preserved is truly a cause for astonishment, when one sees the destruction and destitution in village after village. It is no wonder that a Roman Catholic priest said to me. "Christianity in North China is finished.

Chapels and cathedrals are in ruins, and congregations disbanded." He was incredulous when I assured him that I had just attended a conference at which there were more than seventy leaders of churches in Shantung alone. The reason the Ye-Su Chia-ting chapels were allowed to stand is, first, because they have been used by the Communists for their meetings. In country districts there are no other buildings for their propaganda meetings, so by using them the Communists have tacitly admitted the right of the Christians to use them also.

Next, so many of the chapels are nothing more than enlarged rooms in private houses. This reminds us of St. Paul's words in I Corinthians 16:19, and elsewhere: "Aquila and Priscilla salute you . . . with the church that is in their house." Very frequently a Chinese family, on becoming Christians, will adapt or alter a room in their house and gather in the neighbours. This becomes the nucleus and beginning of the Church in that village. The Communists cannot destroy the church without destroying the home. p56 There is again a further point.

For some years now the local churches of the Chia-ting have emphasized the sanctity of labour. To them work done in the name of the Lord is worship. Their chapels are therefore used as workshops, where weaving, spinning, sewing of shoes, and knitting are carried on. As soon as the service begins all noisy work is stopped. The zest for singing and testimonies is if anything enhanced by such a method. "Music while you work," becomes a very pleasant fact. This has given the Communists a shock.

But on the other hand in such a crowded and poverty-stricken land, there is perhaps something to be said for the Communist point of view, that church buildings are a waste of space and building material. Sunday is used by the Chia-ting churches as a day on which work for others is done. Rosters are posted on Saturday of work parties and their duties for the next day. These rosters are arranged by the departmental heads at their business meeting on the Friday evening of each week.

The villages around are surveyed and lists of poor and needy families are made and those without farm implements and animals, and of widows and orphans. A party is then allotted to the particular task, and that party takes the implements and animals needed. Lists are also made of roads, bridges and other public utilities in the district in need of repair. In chapter one I mentioned a bog we came through on the day I arrived. One day I asked if anything had been done for this quagmire to the north of the village. "Come and see," said Mr. Ching. Beyond living memory that bog had troubled the district. When we arrived, the finishing touches were being put to a p57 IMAGE

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solid stone structure, the show bridge of the district. The quagmire would trouble it no longer.

At this point my diary says, "The Communists are now coming to learn from the Christians, and their former arrogance has largely vanished."

The way in which these people keep Sunday has produced a very notable victory. Instead of being another cause for persecution it has become a day of praise and joy and unity.

## EDUCATION

It has become necessary to change their classroom methods of teaching. Everybody in the Homes of Jesus is of course literate, but Christian schools became illegal as soon as the Communists took over. The Chia-ting were allowed to carry on their schools. How and why is this? The children all went out to work in the fields in the early morning. Many a time have Heng-shin and I watched them at work, weeding or picking grubs (insect pests are bad in China), or gleaning, and always with a diligence and joy that was remarkable.

Since there were no games to call them away, they made a game of their work. Competitions and hurrying hither and thither were their playtime. Only once did I see quarrelling or bullying. There may have been more but I did not see it, and I had plenty of opportunity for observation. I was therefore interested to see how this case would be dealt with. It was the same boy I noticed several times, and apparently so did others also, for the next time I saw him he was suspended from school and at work in the carpenter's shop under the control of older men. p59 Suddenly in the midst of the children's activities the teacher appeared.

All then gathered in the shade of a tree, and school began in earnest. If necessary a blackboard and textbooks were brought, all of which were made by the teachers themselves. On wet days they carded and spun wool and thread, or husked maize (I am speaking of what I have seen). Spinning wool seems particularly the work of the boys, while the girls spin cotton thread for weaving into cloth. The teachers supervised during these sessions, and without interrupting their activities any subject on the curriculum could be dealt with by them.

All that a visitor would see was a room full of children doing manual work. They had a school magazine, written and illustrated by themselves. It was quite up to the standard of our school magazines at home. Individuals about the compound showed their abilities in various ways. As an example, Sheng-yen, the blacksmith's striker, was assistant choir conductor. I saw him conduct sections of Handel's Messiah; other former scholars showed by their aptitudes how deeply the work of the teachers had gone.

As I have already pointed out, the farm workers, the Carpenters, the blacksmiths, the bookbinders all had their theme songs, each of which was being constantly modified and improved. Their zest left no room for inertia. On the blackboards one saw statements of the day's plans, often summed up by a jingle rhyme, and the best of these were kept. It was all a continuation of school; the schoolroom did not end their student days, nor their study of literary forms. p60 The tiny tots, conducted by Tsi-slieng, the wife of the blacksmith, went through their action songs just as children do at home.

Sunday School was managed much as it is with us, but was more orderly. The village children around also come in for their special times of instruction. Their standard was far behind that of the Chia-ting children, but they were not forgotten and were given special periods on Sundays and holidays. I was touched to see a dumb village girl standing with her village group on the chapel platform and making feeble attempts to copy their actions. How different would have been her lot in an ordinary heathen village only those who have seen heathen China know.

Whence comes the spirit which has produced our schools and asylums for the deaf, dumb, and blind? Think not that any heathen country has these, nor is there any place of refuge for the insane. FAMILY

## LIFE

The Communists need armies; bigger and better armies is the constant demand. Odd as it may seem, there is a manpower shortage in China. War has been an endemic evil for the past forty years. The regime of Chiang-kai-shek is not to be judged too harshly. It proved its worth in this, that during the time in which it held undisputed sway there was relative peace and good government. That was before the Japanese attack in 1936. But there is a shortage of men, as witness the number of unmarried girls in North China before the Communist dealt with the situation in their own way.

Dr. Bessie and Helen Tso told me this, thus verifying my own observations. It was obvious that in the farms around, labour was at a p61 premium, and frequently there was no labour to be had. Whole families, including little girls and very old men, were a common sight in the fields. But now every girl must be married. Cannon-fodder is needed, and the Chinese have a very similar idiom to ours. Some squads of soldiers are composed of half male and half female, always in pairs, and not necessarily married.

The mate is "responsible" for the girl soldier. It is no uncommon sight to see an overloaded girl soldier fall from fatigue or to suckle her baby by the roadside. All in the Party are of course expected to be married, and the children are put into creches. They told us that among normal children in these creches the mortality is more than 30 per cent. In open-eyed admiration at the kindergartens of the Chia-ting the Communists asked, "How do you make the nurses love the children?"

Local officials have the power to force any girl to be married, and thus any girl over fifteen is in danger. This is the situation. How have the Christians met it? In Chia-ting communities every young woman was either engaged or married to a Christian. There is among them no thought of marriage with a non-Christian; no such thing as a mixed marriage. I watched as closely as possible the way in which young people were guided and brought together. It was a privilege I had of being present with the elders in council when engagements were contracted.

Very soon after an engagement the marriage took place in an extremely impressive ceremony. This was followed by a wedding breakfast and honeymoon. All of this was a complete break with the old heathen form; even the word "honeymoon" is exactly translated from English and has p62 come to be in common use. Expectant mothers are given very efficient prenatal care. Mothers who have duties in the large central Homes put their children into the kindergarten and attend them under guidance until they are weaned.

Then the parents may be sent out into village churches where they have homes of their own, or their home may become the nucleus of the village church, if there was no previous one. Conditions and situations vary. Some parents live permanently in the central or mother Home. Their children are kept in the nursery and kindergarten; later they go to school, and then to one of the departments to learn a trade. While the children are young the parents see them at regular intervals.

The children are always well and tastefully dressed, in marked contrast to the adults, who dress very poorly in patched, often purposely patched, garments, which are always spotlessly clean. As I stated earlier, when I first saw MaChuang village, I was amazed at the beauty of the children's dresses. The mothers and nurses no doubt find this an outlet for their taste and artistry. What an answer this is to Communist squalor! And no objection can be made to it, for the needs of the rising generation are overstressed by the Communists.

For adults fine clothes are taboo, and a danger to the one who dresses in them. A grown-up seeks, no matter what his financial status or position, to look poverty-stricken. It seems, however, that the position is changing, as it has changed in Russia. I heard many unguarded remarks outside MaChuang about "having the old landlord under a new name; he's now called a Communist." The ordinary people are usually patched and filthy. One p63 can travel through scores of villages with dirty, unkempt inhabitants and children, and houses we would not bed an animal in.

The surprise with which Communists first saw MaChuang with its scores of healthy people in clean garments, was very marked. But the children struck them with nothing else but awe, and they gazed at them in unstinted admiration. Any new group of Communists always asked to see the children first, and like the Queen of Sheba, they marveled at very much the same things -- their housing, their knowledge, and the wisdom of their nurses and attendants, the food of their tables, their manners and grace before meals, and above all, their dress.

These things come only from Christ. "I am come that they might have life, and that they might; have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). WELFARE WORK Let me refer particularly to three branches of their work, which have surpassed even the theories of the Communists: communal farming, medical work, and trade. Here are quotations from letters I received in 1951. Dr. Bessie Chen wrote: "I will let Helen write about our conference, which was quite a success and different this year.

I talked on Midwifery; Doctors Feng and Chu talked on Medicine and Public Health. Others again talked On bee-keeping, others on sugar-making from beet and from barley. From visitors and brethren of other Homes and Christian Communities we had talks on their living conditions and health. p64 "Representatives from the Communist authorities in Taian attended our conference and received much benefit. One of them gave us talks on present-day politics. We all listened quietly and carefully. (I smiled when I read this).

When they left they showed their satisfaction for all they had seen and heard. "Two teachers from this Home, a man and a woman, have been asked to start a night school for beginners in a neighbouring village. Day classes for the women in the same village have also been organized by the Communists, and they have put us in control." (Even the enthusiasm which these Christians brought to this work was insufficient, and eventually the classes stopped of themselves; the heathen scholars ceased to attend).

"A commercial society has been organized by us and the Ching-chia-hang Home of Jesus to facilitate the buying and selling of all sorts of things, for the public as well as for ourselves. Heng-shin has been busy all day in this matter. The Communist authorities were very much surprised and inspired to see us so earnest and sincere in rendering this service to the public. A small piece of land has been loaned to us by the Communists at Taian railway station, and we will open a restaurant there for poor people."

This, I take it, is the "light" and "salt" of Christianity in operation. These Chinese Christians know this and have said as much. It is neither cleverness nor daring that the Easterner needs, but a moral background. A Chinese will learn to drive and understand a car in a few weeks, but it will be in its maintenance that he will break down. It is for this reason that a Hindu can graduate with high honours in p65 medicine, but if he is not employed by the government, he will presently sink gradually to the level of his village forbears.

It is not education that the East needs, but something deeper. Out of this deeper thing, the desire to be educated will arise spontaneously. Their need is Life. A true Christian will never remain uneducated. The first thing a Chinese country-man does after he has been converted is to learn to read. Mr. Ching

constantly mentioned apathetic old country women, who had been practically slaves all their lives, transformed overnight. "Transformed by the renewing of your mind," is the way St.

Paul puts it. "It is from such that we get our best and keenest theologians," Mr. Chiug says. The first Earl of Birkenhead said something to the effect that St. Paul's mind was the greatest mind of all time. What is the power that can take an old Chinese peasant woman and almost overnight give her a mind that can comprehend St. Paul? AGRICULTURE

After I had left MaChuang, while I was standing in a group of Chinese, I asked, "What is the average holding of each adult in this district?" The answer was, "One-third of an acre." "How much then," I asked, "is sufficient for one man's food?" "From half an acre one person can get sufficient food to live." "The inference is therefore," I said, "that nearly the whole rural populations is living at starvation point." "That is so," was the answer. p66 The Communists pride themselves on their system of land tenure.

I should rather say theory, for as yet their system has to be proved. Every soul in Shantung will in the end have an acre of land, they say. Force may be necessary! In MaChuang the amount of land tilled is forty-three acres in all, and there are nearly five hundred souls living in this Christian community. This means that there is less than one-tenth acre per person. There are two other large Homes within twenty miles on either side. Only the greatest efficiency can enable each to live adequately.

What can the Communists say in the face of this demonstration? But there is something else involved. Formerly the land owned by the Chia-ting was in numerous small pieces, scattered in various places over the countryside. These pieces have been exchanged and manipulated until they are now all concentrated around the Home buildings. In general it may be said that it has become possible for farming machinery to be used. To concentrate holdings in China is something beyond the power of human nature to accomplish.

Land has been divided and subdivided between fathers and sons down the centuries. This is the great reason, which is ignored by theorizing, statistical economists, why farming is restricted to the use of hoe and reaping hook. The economist's theories in general are wrong. The heathen farmer still uses his reaping hook, not because he is mentally backward but because of his moral backwardness. How can one of these farmers use a tractor on a piece of land no bigger than a backyard?

If farming is to be modernized and machinery used, as Communism dictates, then these tiny holdings must be converted into larger ones, or the use of machinery is impossible. The Christians are p67 accomplishing this miracle by forbearance and love. Can the Communists do it? They say they are going to, and they may possibly succeed by force. The agrarian problem was not nearly so great in Russia as in China. Perhaps nothing but war and bloodshed on a still greater scale lie before China.

One trembles to think of what is involved, not only for China, but also for the world. God has raised up a witness in China that Communist theories can be put into practice, not by Communists, but by those whom they despise. Man is so constituted that coercion spells his ruin, but only by coercion can Communist theories be put into practice. How wonderful to see these theories, and better than these, being practised by love! I must, however deal in detail with this difficulty of concentrating many small holdings of land into one large piece.

Tractors and machinery cannot be used on tiny parcels of land. The Ye-Su Chia-ting therefore, as I have already mentioned, set about collecting its holdings into one large farm. Nothing would convince one of the intractability of human nature more than a study of Chia-ting's dealings with its neighbours over the last

twenty years. Here is a case in point: There is a most delectable corner of land right in the midst of the Chia-ting holdings. The owner of this piece cannot use it himself, neither can the Chia-ting, and it deforms part of their beautiful compound.

The owner knows that his cupidity has damaged him irrevocably, yet every time terms are settled a night's reflection reveals to him the possibility of further gains. Every new concession from the Christians has brought a new demand from him. The first arrangement was a piece of land similar in size, p68 near his own village. He then demanded a well in addition. This was granted, and a well was dug for him. Then he demanded machinery and pump for the well. Then he wanted a horse-works to work the pump. His next move IMAGE

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was for an animal to work it. Then he wanted trees to be planted near the well, and they had to be big ones (the Chinese are very clever at transplanting quite large trees). Finally, he wanted additional money. At this point the negotiations had stuck, when I left.

I do not think for one moment that such indecision and cupidity were a studied policy. The poor man was being driven by his own "vile" nature; he was being driven as with a goad, and could not help himself even if he would.

In many cases during these protracted negotiations I have seen the direct hand of God, by sudden poverty and death, bringing negotiations to a climax and forcing the hands of heathen negotiators. But in most cases, temperance and love won the day. This is how we learn forbearance, and tolerance, say the Christians. Uncontrolled, tigerish human nature can be dealt with only by "purges," say the Communists.

Again, the hedge of trees in many places abuts on a neighbour's land. Unreasonable ones have, on the plea that the roots are absorbing nourishment from their land, deeply trenched and cut the roots of the trees, deforming them in places.

Mr. Ching, far from being offended, glories in these difficulties because of the many triumphs of grace seen in intransigent neighbours being won over and converted.

"On the other hand," he says, "how can I have my own corners rubbed off and straightened, if others don't rub and twist me?" "Uncut, unwrought gems are valueless," says the Chinese aphorism.

A more serious difficulty, unknown to us, is the extra-ordinary one of stealing land. What land hunger there is in

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China! An unwatched neighbour will gradually dig away the land bordering on his field, and transport it to enlarge his own land. The road outside one of the Chia-ting gates was thus stolen, leaving an impassable hole. The thief anticipated that the Christians would have to fill it up with soil of their own. The digging was all done at night and secretly.

An unwanted grave mound is moved in a very simple way from my land to yours. If a man buys another man's field with graves in it, then the graves are inviolate. But nibbling at one side and building up the other will shift the most inconvenient grave to a more convenient spot. It takes time, of course.

Heng-shin said to me one day, "I wonder how many graves in China have bones in them? If they are isolated, then they are almost certain to be nothing but a mound of earth."

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