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The Skull Mantra (Inspector Shan Tao Yun)

By Eliot Pattison



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Winner of the 2001 Edgar Award for Best First Novel, *The Skull Mantra* was a sensation when first published and received wide acclaim from critics and readers alike. *The Skull Mantra* is ranked as a novel about a people and a place--the Tibetans of the high Himalayas--as it is a gripping thriller.

The corpse is missing its head and is dressed in American clothes. Found by a Tibetan prison work gang on a windy cliff, the grisly remains clearly belong to someone too important for Chinese authorities to bury and forget. So the case is handed to veteran police inspector Shan Tao Yun. Methodical, clever Shan is the best man for the job, but he too is a prisoner, deported to Tibet for offending someone high up in Beijing's power structure. Granted a temporary release, Shan is soon pulled into the Tibetan people's desperate fight for its sacred mountains and the Chinese regime's blood-soaked policies. Then, a Buddhist priest is arrested, a man Shan knows is innocent. Now time is running out for Shan to find the real killer.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Not many political thrillers are set in Tibet, and few can match the power and poetry of this debut novel by journalist Eliot Pattison. At the heart of the story is a forced labor camp where the Chinese imprison Buddhist monks and other local dissidents they've swept up since taking over Tibet. The prison also holds a few special Chinese prisoners--including Shan Tao Yun. This middle-aged man was once the inspector general of the Ministry of Economy in Beijing, specializing in fraud cases. For reasons even he doesn't understand, he has been imprisoned and brutalized, and now he spends his days breaking rocks high in the Himalayas on a road crew called the People's 404th Construction Brigade. Shan manages to survive under these harsh conditions thanks to the spiritual guidance of his fellow prisoners, but this precarious balance is threatened by the discovery of the headless body of a local Chinese official near a road construction site.

The dead man's head soon turns up in a famous shrine--a cave that contains the skulls of heroic monks. The shrewd Red Army colonel in charge of the district asks Shan to conduct an investigation: offers of better food and conditions combined with threats against his monk friends convinces him to take on the task. Colonel Tan wants a fast resolution that incriminates a mute, passive monk found near the cave, but Shan is certain that the man isn't guilty. More likely killers include other high-ranking Chinese officials, as well as some American mining capitalists who had personal as well as financial dealings with the dead man.

By engaging his readers in a mass of details, Pattison makes us believe completely in Shan and his perilous situation--and creates a rare combination of excitement and enlightenment. --*Dick Adler*

From Publishers Weekly

A venerable plot device: the discredited detective given one last chance. Ais invested with stunning new life in this debut thriller from a veteran journalist who clearly knows his exotic territory. The gulags of Tibet, where the Chinese keep the Buddhist monks and other locals they've swept up since occupying the country, also house a few special Chinese prisoners. Shan Tao Yun, working as a laborer on a road crew called the People's 404th Construction Brigade high in the Himalayas, was once the inspector general of the Ministry of Economy in Beijing before he was imprisoned for refusing Party membership. Now he struggles to survive his harsh new life, gaining spiritual sustenance from the monks in his brigade. The discovery of the headless body of a local official, wearing American clothes and carrying American cash, changes all that, as Shan is threatened and cajoled by the shrewd colonel in charge of the district into conducting an investigation. Col. Tan wants a quick and dirty job that implicates a monk found near the site, but Shan knows the man isn't guilty: more-likely culprits include other high-ranking Chinese and a pair of American mining entrepreneurs. To encourage Shan to come to a rapid resolution, Tan dangles the fate of the monks of the 404th before him, surrounding their barracks with brutal Public Security troops. Like Martin Cruz Smith's Arkady Renko, Shan becomes our Don Quixote, an apolitical guide through a murky world of failed socialism. As his Sancho, Pattison has created another memorable character, an ambitious and conflicted young Tibetan called Yeshe, who can "sound like a monk one moment and a party functionary the next." Set against a background that is alternately bleak and blazingly beautiful, this is at once a top-notch thriller and a substantive look at Tibet under siege.

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From Library Journal

Sentenced to penal servitude in Tibet, Shan, a disgraced prosecutor, is assigned instead to complete a pro forma investigation of the gruesome murder of a Chinese official. The party line is that dissident Tibetan

monks are to blame, but Shan quickly realizes that the truth lies in other directions. Working with Buddhist rituals, Shan shapes and discards theories to fit a range of facts, emotions, and spiritual beings. Set in the mountainous regions of Lhasa, this first novel is a stark and compelling saga of the conflict between disdainful and violent Chinese and nonviolent Tibetans trying to protect the vestiges of their faith. As in Tony Hillerman's Navajo mysteries, Pattison's characters venerate traditional beliefs, and mystical insight is a tool for finding murderers. Pattison writes with confident knowledge and spare, graceful prose. With Tibet so much in the news lately, all public libraries will have readers for this book. [Minotaur is St. Martin's new mystery imprint.AEd.]ABarbara Conaty, Library of Congress.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ian Ashlock:

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