

A Hakka Man Farms Rare Earth in South China

Wang Ping

First of all, it's not earth nor it's rare, as they say
It lies under our feet, sparkling the soil we farm
Red, green, yellow, blue, purple, sky of grass
And buffalos, patches of rice, bamboos, sweet yams
We came here as guests—Hakka—fleeing from angry
Lords. Year after year, we bent over the earth
Feet and hands in the neon soil, our sweat
Fertilized the fields, children, ancestors' graves
Our stove cooked the fragrance from the sun and moon

Now we dig, deep in the mud, our boots
Rotting in the rainbow sludge...Dig, and we dig
Hoes, pickaxes, guns, explosives, acid wash
Ten Yuan a sac, this red dirt speckled with
Blue and yellow. Home, we say, a small haven
Painted with green. Now the mountains are lifted
Deep crates in the fields, blood and pus in rivers
Streams...all because the world wants this earth
"Vitamins" for I-pods, plasma TVs, wind turbines
Guided missiles—things that make the world
Cleaner and more beautiful, as they say

And here we are, in the waist deep sludge
A sac of mud—a tail of greed leached in our stove

Fire licks my wife's slender hands
Acid fumes her lungs, liver, stomach
Can't even sip the porridge laced
With the thousand-year-old eggs
In the iron wok, we exhume
Dysprosium, Neodymium, Promethium
All the names of Gods, they say
If gods have eyes, why didn't they see us
Slaves of this world that no longer holds?

In the distance, a mushroom of dust—Boss
And his Toyota Prius, powered by the sludge
That chokes my eyes, ears, nose...*One Rich Field*
25 pounds of metal, ten thousand sacs of earth
Ripped under our feet. We're slipping
Our chests soaked in blood, backs broken
Digging, pulling, no food or water
Our quota still short, the boss will be mad
But no matter. I light a cigarette, each puff
Is the last. Tomorrow is gone, like our village
Here and far away, where horses ran wild
Under the sky, where we, children of
Genghis Khan, return every night in our dream
That is gone, too, they say. Mongolia
Our origin, now a rare earth pit for the world
Oh, Hakka, Hakka, forever the guests
Wandering on this bare earth

- Hakka: Nomads from Mongolia, scattered all over China and world. Most of them now live in Guandong, where the rare earth metals are mined and leached in stone age methods. Inner Monglolia and Guandong produce 95 percent of the rare earth supplies for the world.
- Toyota: the Chinese name is Feng Tian, meaning Rich Field