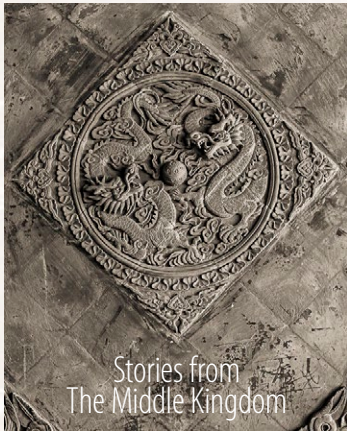




# SKETCHES

*A Chapbook Series by  
Brooks Jensen*



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*The Corn Winnower of Xiang Sha Wan*

*Brooks Jensen*

Brooks Jensen



When I think of camels, I think of dunes and heat and thirst. At the outpost of Xiang Sha Wan near the headwaters of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia, we found plenty of camels at the edge of the massive Gobi Desert. We also found a bitter winter wind that bit man and beast to the bone — instantly freezing every drop of water.





This is the old Asian Silk Route — a region that has a long history with camels. It's easy to see why they can walk across the desert with such ease; they may be the only creatures on the planet that have flatter feet than me. As a kindred cousin, one of my photographic rules to live by is that one can never have too many photographs of camels. I was delighted to have the opportunity to follow this rule — albeit for the first time in my photographic career.



The herd consisted of roughly 300 camels and three or four horses. Clearly, it takes a lot of work to feed and care for this many animals. The stockyards were large and, although primitive, functional. Those charged with caring for the animals live in sparse apartments that face the camel yards.

In spite of the bitter temperatures, we found a crew working in the clear cold of the morning to feed all these hungry mouths — hauling corn stalks, grinding kernels into corn meal, and doing work that would be so familiar to farm workers all over the world. Western visitors are rare to this remote region of China, but they were welcoming and offered us hot tea while we photographed. We eagerly accepted.





This fellow, I was told, was involved in a process called “winnowing.” Not being a farmhand myself, I was unfamiliar with the process, but it’s apparently just a means to use the wind — a commodity in abundance here — to separate the grain from, I guess, the stuff that is *not* grain. It looked like fun, so I motioned my request to give it a go. He smiled, handed me the shovel, and watched my feeble attempts to reproduce his fluid movements. He was “winnowing the corn,” I merely flung it chaotically about and made a bit of a mess. Although they didn’t laugh at me, I could tell they desperately wanted to do so.







Over the years, I've discovered that a self-deprecating humor is a useful photographer's tool. My willingness to try winnowing the corn led to a tender moment. After I put down the shovel, the fellow motioned me to come with him. Around the corner, tucked deep in the midst of a jumble of old equipment, he reached in and pulled out a newly born puppy that looked to my eye more like a guinea pig. He was proud to show it to me and encouraged me to photograph him in this pose. Why he wanted to share this with me, I don't know, but it was a special moment I was glad to record.



I've experienced a number of these kinds of events in my life as a photographer — a connection across the barriers of culture and language that, for the briefest of moments, allows two strangers to connect with one another over a simple human sentiment. It's one of the reasons I love photography so much. Without a camera and a purpose for being here, I would most likely never have shared this moment with this fellow. I never learned his name, so I shall always remember him simply as The Corn Winnower of Xiang Sha Wan.

# *Sketches*

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## *The Corn Winnowing of Xiang Sha Wan*

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