

Ox-Demons and Snake-Spirits

RED GUARD RECIPE:

One. Rip off the boy from his family. Younger is preferred.

Two. Wash his brain thoroughly. Drain out all the sympathy with a colander.

Three. Mix the boy with some *Mao Zedong sixiang* (Mao Zedong Thought) until you see a red armband forming.

Four. Let the Red Guard spread his newly learnt ideals with his classmates.

Countryside China, 1966

Wu is onstage, in front of a crowd of hundreds and twice as many accusatory eyes. They hold out their *Little Red Books* to the sky, like priests holding out their wooden crosses. But he is not here to express his love for Mao. Nor his isms.

“You are a horrible boss. You are a ruthless landlord. And now you display your hatred for the Communist Party. You...” – the Red Guard licks up the saliva covering his lips – “you are a *Four Old!*” the Red Guard boomed to a discordant chorus of jeering.

From a distance, Mama is watching, with their children. They are silent. She is no longer with her counter-revolutionary husband. So that they can still survive.

The Red Guard crouches down. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?” he whispers. Wu ignores him. The Guard signals to the others.

They shove squirming insects down Wu’s mouth. They crawl around. Biting. He lets out unintelligible, primal screams. Bristles tickle his throat, causing reflexive gags; he swallows

them back down to avoid becoming ‘more counter-revolutionary’. His saliva thickens as mucus spreads itself around his mouth.

“Are you a revolutionary?” the Red Guard crouches and yells into his left ear. Wu’s tongue is littered with red ulcers. But they don’t care. They are not satisfied. They kiss the whip deeper into his skin, leaving belt-shaped prints covered in red. He coughs out a pile of worms, slugs and spiders from his mouth. They hurriedly crawl away from the counter-revolutionary.

“*Hengsao yiqie niugui sheshen!*” (Sweep away all ox-faced foes and snake-spirited enemies!) is echoing from below. They continue to whip him. But they breathe more heavily. It feels like Chairman Mao is smirking alongside the crowd.

But then the body stops flinching, and screams of pain fizzle away. They pause. No more whipping, yelling or cheering. Silence. Snake-spirited blood slithers its way across his ox-faced head, from his snout into his motionless eyes. Another *Red Star Sanitation Officer* mindlessly passes through the stage with a dumpster, piled with bloodied grey feet and stiff, cold bones. It screeches away from the bloodstained wooden stage, with one body more piled on top, still warm to the touch.

“No documented family... he was disposable anyway,” a Red Guard mutters. She looks behind the curtains, and yanks along another man, whimpering. And the Guards resume their whipping and yelling. And the crowd resumes cheering.

But from a distance, Mama is shedding tears and shielding the children’s eyes. They cover their mouths and scream.

Mama is naked. The Guards ripped her clothes off. And everything else.

Tap.

She is beating at the 'repaired' wooden floorboard with a sharpened stick.

'Repaired' – there are bumps everywhere underneath.

A man walks by. He thinks that she is insane. 'He doesn't understand.'

Tap.

'Can you even call yourself Mama? With no husband? Your children stolen for 'a more revolutionary future'?'

Thud.

Mama's stomach gurgles louder than her taps. She has to walk further now because the local marketplace does not want to sell to the 'wife of a *Four Old*'.

'My money is still money.'

THUD. THUD.

She is hitting harder. The factory has moved to 'more revolutionary hands'.

There is nothing left.

THUD. THUD.

THU-

The plank breaks off. A splinter flies into her eye.

She screams. Then stops.

Tap.

Tap.

Mama is still naked.