

施蟄存：夜叉

The Yaksha¹

By Shi Zhecun

Translated by Christopher Rosenmeier

FOLLOWING the doctor's advice, I waited three weeks before going to Room 437 in Paulun Hospital to see my friend Bian Shiming. During those weeks I had phoned Dr Richter, the German physician, daily to inquire what my friend was suffering from. But Dr Richter could give no explanation, other than stating in his clumsy English that Bian was suffering from 'nervous distress due to excessive terror'. One day when my wife had gone to visit him, he was ranting and the two nurses wouldn't let her near enough to listen. According to them, my friend was most likely suffering from some sort of romantic trauma because most of his ranting consisted of just one sentence: 'Terrible woman, horrible woman, stay away from me!' and he would raise his hands as if he were warding off something. Otherwise he was mostly incoherent.

But I was rather sceptical of this account since I knew that my friend had no history of being entangled in love affairs. He is a straightforward middle-aged man who spends his days working in the office or playing ball or fencing at the sports ground. He has a strong body and a sturdy mind. He often laughed at the grief of those who suffered from unrequited love and ridiculed their foolish infatuations. Even if he got involved with some girl, he would never develop a mental disorder as a result.

Moreover, I simply couldn't understand why my young cousin, who had arrived in Shanghai just four days earlier, could have had such a frightful effect on

¹Translator's Note: Yakshas are supernatural spirits in Chinese Buddhist mythology. They also feature in Hindu and Jain texts. They appear as both benign nature deities as well as malevolent spirits.

his nerves. They had met once last year, but there was certainly nothing more between them. How very peculiar! This was a strange matter indeed and I sorely regretted having introduced them in the first place.

As I stood before the door to Room 437, the white door and white walls felt spine-chilling. Black would have been much better, but this hospital whiteness—not just the doors and walls, but every bed, piece of linen, utensil, and dissection table made me feel as though I was entering a house of mourning. It made me tense and even interfered with my breathing. I took out my handkerchief which luckily had a blue chequered pattern that calmed me down a little. Afterwards, I curled my middle finger and gently tapped the door with my knuckle. I had no idea what I would see when it opened.

The door seemed to swing ajar on its own, but just by a thin crack. First I saw a pair of dark eyes and next a pair of lovely red lips. This was a sliver of a beautiful nurse's face. I saw a sliver because it was only between the door and its frame, and was difficult to make out. Behind her the walls were white, she wore a white cap, and her face was similarly white and delicate. If I weren't standing so close, I could have mistaken it for a white tea towel with two longan seeds and a small water chestnut.

Like a pair of lovers having a secret encounter, we spoke softly.

'Is Mr Bian feeling better?'

'Quite, he'll soon be well.'

'And is he awake?'

She shook her head.

'Could I come in and see him?'

She nodded and opened the door just enough to let me in. As I took my first step in, she motioned with her hand that I should keep my voice down, then she closed the door.

But there was no need to sneak in on tiptoes like a burglar. My friend was already turning his head, his hair dishevelled. He turned round to face me, his mouth briefly gaping and opened his eyes just as I approached the edge of his bed.

He lifted his gaze from my legs and met my eyes while I was looking down at him. Focusing for an instant, he let out a weak muffled groan and nodded towards me. He made the effort to lift his hand out from under the cotton comforter and shake my hand, but it was clear to me that he had lost his old strength of grip.

'Bian, my friend, do you recognize me? Are you feeling better?'

He nodded with a smile, but I still suspected that he was not quite lucid. 'Do you recognize me?' I asked again.

To my surprise, he laughed as heartily as he used to when he was well, pushed

down the covers and sat up quite briskly. One nurse propped up his pillows while another gave him a glass of milk. 'Why, Shi, do you think I've gone mad?' he asked. 'I am quite well already. Fully recovered! I'll leave the hospital in a few days.'

'If you really are well, that's a relief,' I replied. 'I still haven't understood what happened to you so suddenly. What did you see in my cousin that day that caused you to call out in such fright? Do you know that you fainted and fell to the floor?'

Upon hearing my question, Bian looked at me intently. He took a big drink of milk, then turned to the nurses, 'Please leave us alone for a while. I'll ring the bell if I need you.'

After the two nurses had left with some misgivings, Bian asked me to sit on the bed. He placed his glass on the bedside table and thought for a moment before speaking.

'It is a terrible matter,' he began gravely. 'I shouldn't be telling you this at all. But if I don't tell you, pretty soon I might really go crazy. Do you know what I've been doing lately? ... Let me tell you then, I'll tell you the whole story.'

'As you know, it was to take care of my grandmother's funeral that I went to Hangzhou. The grave was at the foot of Little Huashan in Liuxia town. So I lodged with the family whose graves are close by ours at a place called Yangjia Arch. The work with the grave—from the opening of the burial plot to the placing of the tablet on top—kept me busy for a couple of weeks. But I didn't tire of country life at all; it was a very nice spot for seclusion. The family that keeps the graves lives in a hollow in the mountains, where the houses are set in rows of five and his house was the last on the east side. Outside his door there was a lush bamboo grove, to one side an ancient deep pond, and in the back a clear brook whose babble throughout the day gave me great pleasure.

'After the funeral matters were settled, I still didn't want to leave. I wrote to Shanghai and requested a leave of ten more days so that I could recuperate in the countryside and enjoy the beautiful scenery—a rare opportunity. Furthermore I had gone to the West Lake Library and borrowed lots of books with old tales about the place. The six-mile stretch along the Western creek from Songmuchang to Liuxia town is full of ancient, secluded and magical sites just waiting to be discovered. The setting sun in the bamboo grove, the sunrise over the mountain peaks, the hazy mists between the ridges on a rainy day, the tallow trees and reed catkins by the water's edge, the fish market in the town at dawn, the sound of the woodcutters calling to each other on the mountain at dusk, glistening white stones in the river beneath the moon, the wildfires in faraway mountains in the dead of night ... Ah, you haven't been there, so you can't imagine how beautiful the scenery is.'

‘But how could I have imagined the disaster that would befall me there! One day I hired a little boat with a reed awning to go to Jiaolu priory. Have you ever been on such a boat? It’s fascinating. I’m sure you know the line from Du Fu’s poem: “The spring water has only risen four or five inches, the simple skiff just barely held two or three people.” I’m sure that “simple skiff” was just this sort of boat. A middle-aged woman rowed for me, following the intricate tributaries. After some time, we made it to the ancient priory, which is surrounded by water on all sides so it can’t be reached by land. I learned about this ancient place from *The Annals of the Western Creek* and several other books. It’s well known because one can watch from the railing the wild geese flying past as well as see the paintings by Tang Yin and Ni Zan that have been carefully packed away in caskets by the monks. It was for these reasons that I decided to go there.

‘We rowed to the rocky precipice outside the front gate of the priory where another little boat like mine was just casting off. The sides of our boats brushed against each other. From behind the wicker window I saw into the other boat’s rear cabin—can you guess what I saw there? ... I saw that ... which brought me disaster that very night ... It was strange! It was truly so very strange! I caught the briefest glimpse of a woman who was dressed entirely in white. Of course a woman in white clothing is nothing special. And at that time my mind was as sound as my body so I concluded that she was also just a traveller from elsewhere, most likely a prostitute or some other such tawdry woman. In Shanghai I see countless women like that every day without ever taking the slightest notice. It defies belief, but this time, from that moment on, a shimmering bright white glimmer danced constantly before my eyes, like a speck of dandruff on my glasses.

‘I’ve seen Tang Yin’s paintings. Behind the trees with falling leaves, one glimpses the corner of a temple and within it stands that woman in glimmering white. I’ve seen Ni Zan’s paintings where one sees that woman in glimmering white reclining among the bamboo stalks on a hill at dusk. And I’ve seen several paintings in succession, and that beguiling woman can be found in every single one. In the straw huts of the old fishermen, in the pistils of flowers, on high mountains, and even in waterfalls this woman intrudes. I was a bit startled but I blamed this on my own immoral thoughts. I confess that lustful ideas did come to mind with that brief glimpse, for the posture of a woman so languidly leaning against the reed awning of a little boat was more seductive than anything I had ever seen before. Consciously laughing at my folly and reprimanding myself, I made an effort to dispel my wicked thoughts. But as the young servant boy steeped my tea, and led me to the water pavilion to admire the reeds from the

railing, every reed catkin in view mystically transformed into that woman, swaying gently before me. I despaired at my inability to resist.

‘So was this an ordinary woman or was there something distinctive about her? In Shanghai there had never been a woman who could attract me like this, but in this place I could barely control myself. Was this due to the person or the surroundings? ... I could not allow that my nerves should have suddenly rebelled against my very nature. Nor could I allow the fact that this woman was graceful and beautiful beyond measure. So even if my heart had fluttered for an instant, the feeling certainly couldn’t have lasted for more than a second. But at the same time, I simply couldn’t find anything erotically exciting about this river landscape on such a clear and brilliant day. So I blamed everything on my poor eyesight and resolved to see an optometrist immediately after returning to Shanghai.

‘When I returned to the little building where I lived it was already dusk, and the mist lay low. I should tell you that this family I stayed with is a country landlord and his rooms were built with exquisite taste. It was a multi-storied building three courtyards deep and I had the whole eastern wing to myself. The ceiling, floorboards, and windowsills were all painted with heavy, Chinese-style black lacquer. Through the glass of the rear window I could see two mountain peaks rising one above the other. From the side window I could gaze down upon the ancient still waters of a mysterious square pond and a dense thicket of trees and bamboo that wound its way up to the foot of the mountains. Every evening I enjoyed sitting in my room and letting myself be engulfed by the darkness,



taking in the quiet autumn dusk of the ancient village. As I opened the window, a cool breeze brought in the fragrant whiff of burning pine from the kitchens, and I heard the steps of the woodcutters returning home and the calling of crows and hawks in the trees. Then I would settle down contentedly to read a book or two.

“That day I sat as usual in my worn rattan chair and lit one of the Golden Rat cigarettes I had bought in town. After relaxing for a short while, I randomly picked up a book from the square table that sat beside me. The poor quality cigarettes made me cough, which set my hands shuddering and the book that I held falling open of itself. I dropped the rest of the cigarette and lowered my eyes to see that the book had opened by chance onto a passage recording the appearance of a yaksha ages ago in the mountains nearby.

“It said that there was a high mountain covered with trees and that a yaksha had appeared there a century ago. It often appeared at dusk in the guise of a beautiful woman. She would sob or sit alone by the gates of tombs at the foot of the mountain in order to lure in peasants and woodcutters passing by. When this was at its worst, a person would disappear from the nearby village almost every night, and every morning a pile of white bones would be discovered. Later the villagers set fire to the mountain, and the scorching flames burned for seven days and seven nights, razing all the trees to the ground. Then they set out ferocious dogs all over the foothills, and so this dreadful tragedy ended. But nobody dared to say that the yaksha had actually been killed, for as the midnight hour approached, the villagers often heard the wailing of the hunting dogs calling out to one another.

“This happened a century ago according to the book. But the power of the words was able to strike across the barriers of space and time, for after reading this tale I was quite terrified. I imagined a hill wraith like the one Qu Yuan describes—“her mantle was hanging moss, she was girded with ivy”²—moving quickly in the moonlight across the barren mountain slopes before suddenly vanishing. Not long after, I caught a glimpse of a woman between the trees who was dressed in white mourning garments. She was set off against the groves, seeming neither to approach nor retreat. A yaksha, this was what I imagined a yaksha to be like. Yet have I seen a yaksha before? Who could tell? You couldn’t tell when she had metamorphosed, not even if she stood right in front of you. But what if ... what? Perhaps such things really do exist? Who can be certain that the mysterious woman in white I’d seen in the reed boat was not a yaksha incarnate? I swear

² Translator’s Note: The line about the hill wraith is from Qu Yuan 屈原 (*fl.* 3rd c. BC), ‘Shan gui’ 山鬼 [The hill wraith], *Jiuge* 九歌 [Nine songs], trans. Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 160.

that I saw no one else in her cabin. She had the little boat all to herself and that's suspicious. Doubts seized me and the more I thought about it, the more I felt that she wasn't a real woman. Her face had a sinful air and her eyes had mystic powers. She was surely a yaksha in another form. I shut the book and slowly raised my eyes to look out the window. I saw a wisp of curling smoke, which I was certain was cooking smoke from the furthest cabin slowly wafting upwards as though rising from a valley between two mountains. I watched the smoke rising to the peaks of the mountains and continue upwards. Then the smoke swirled three times in a circle and dispersed, leaving behind a white figure. Try to imagine what I saw ... Oh, if only you were there sitting next to me, you couldn't possibly deny that it was the woman in white soaring across the sky!

'I was quite beside myself. I simply couldn't see how I could have come to read that passage. I've always been strong, but at that moment I felt exhausted. It was then I realized that I was being overcome with neurasthenia. Unfortunately my host was too hospitable. While we ate dinner he persuaded me to drink numerous glasses of Shaoxing rice wine, so in my stupor I forgot everything. After dinner we sat chatting together as usual beneath the ancient paraffin lamp and I felt reinvigorated.

'After everybody else had settled down for the night, I remained alone upstairs having a cigarette as I leaned on the window frame. It was in the middle of the night, around the third watch or so. The autumn moon rose gently over the mountain ridges—large, yellow, and near—wearing an inscrutable expression. I still wasn't quite sober, so I made my way downstairs, softly unlatched the door, and slipped out behind the building. I stepped into the golden moonlight in the forest and with the sensitivity of a poet, I lingered in the night scene.



Mountain and Moon 山月 by Jin Daiqiang (Kan Tai-keung) 靳埭強 dated 1990
Courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Art

‘By the time the moon had risen to the peak of the mountains and turned a silvery white, I had already wandered quite far. In the moonlight, I looked about at the mountain wilderness, which appeared almost translucent in the light. When we’re in Shanghai, we no longer have the opportunity to enjoy such pure, honest, and simple blessings.

‘But I didn’t get to enjoy this good fortune for long. Just as I passed a large tree, I was suddenly aware of a white gleam coming at me from one side. It dashed past my head and flew into the distance before me. What was it? I was dazzled by its glare and couldn’t see it clearly. I only saw that it had bolted into a thicket just ahead of me. So I stepped up to the thicket to take a closer look. I was already regretting that I hadn’t brought a walking stick so that I could poke through the mass of delicate entangled branches. I stood to the side of a clump of brambles where I could look through an opening in the branches and thorns. Sure enough, there was something white there. I picked up a rock and threw it at it but missed. The white thing trembled but didn’t move. So I picked up another rock, and this time I hit my mark. It scurried out and dashed between my legs. By the time I had turned round, it had already bolted into some tea bushes over fifty yards away. But I clearly saw that it was a hare.

‘I doubted that this was the same thing which had dashed past my head. Hares cannot fly. Have you ever seen a flying hare? I concluded that unless something strange remained in the thicket, this hare was definitely something suspicious. I couldn’t help it—I moved towards the tea bushes, probably just out of curiosity.

‘Do you know what I saw on the other side of the sandy tea bushes? Oh, you’ll never guess. I saw a path down below, so clear in the moonlight, and in this cool clear light there was a flash, seemingly the outline of a woman in white. I was stunned. What was this woman doing at such an hour of the night on a mountain path like this? So I reconsidered the question of “whether this be ghost or man” and the question prodded my memory. This was the unvanquished yaksha of a century before. It could turn into a woman in a little boat outside Jiaolu priory or a flying bird or a little hare. And now it had tempted me out here and turned into a woman in white once again. Such were my fantasies as the jet black mountains seemed to have formed a magic wall around me, enclosing me in the enchanted gardens of a magic palace which looked beautiful on the surface but was in fact full of horrors within. My gaze was locked on the woman in white who was floating rapidly forward. She seemed to be walking carelessly but swiftly—her nimble stride wasn’t at all like the gait of a country woman. Where was she going? I would not mind examining the den of a yaksha. You know that I’ve always been brave

and strong, but I also deeply regretted not having brought along a hunting rifle, although I didn't care then and went in pursuit.

'I closed in on her. In the moonlight I could see her quite clearly. Wasn't this the same woman I'd seen earlier in the reed boat? She had the same figure and clothing. The only thing I didn't know was whether her face, if she turned around, would be hideous or beautiful. But what do you suppose, when I followed her, that I was hoping for? Did I hope that she would turn around with the ugly face of a yaksha or with the face of a beautiful woman? ... No, I didn't hope for either. I knew that whichever of my hopes was realized, it would be dangerous. I'm sure you understand.

'But I'm straying from the story. Even though I'd decided that she was a shape-shifting yaksha, I was afraid that if she stopped and turned to me with a beautiful smiling face, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from going to her and caressing her shoulders, even though I was fully aware that this was a dangerous thing to do. Isn't a cold translucent autumn night the perfect time for love? Isn't a secluded valley with luxuriant trees and flowers the perfect place for it? Even though I was fully aware that just minutes or hours after making love to a yaksha, I would lie with broken limbs as the cruel price for this unnatural love, I wondered what wondrous pleasures I would experience before suffering the brutal punishment. Therefore an absurd desire suddenly burned within me. I wanted to experience the things described in the classical fiction of the supernatural. I wanted to extend the boundaries of human love, to find a natural beauty in an unnatural act. I had truly cast aside all reason. I had fallen in love with this yaksha who seduced me with her graceful steps, always out of reach.

'But I couldn't overtake her, even walking briskly. I followed her closely along the sandy banks of a broad creek. I followed her down the slope of a hill to the gravel bank. Her shadow floated across the water like a water nymph. Ahead there was a promontory jutting into the river overgrown with clumps of grass. She turned behind it, but when I got there she was gone. The water babbled and the white shadow on it had vanished. There was only a large water serpent passing along following the stream. It penetrated into my shadow on the water as though it were gnawing at my heart.

'I looked up and suddenly caught sight of her again on the opposite bank. It turned out that some large stepping stones were protruding above the water not far away from where I was standing. She must have crossed there. So I also crossed the river and took up the pursuit again on the other side. But the distance between us had increased.

‘She didn’t seem to notice me behind her. It was as though she didn’t hear my steps, just as I had not heard hers. I strained my eyes to see where she was going. If the distance between us increased by another fifty yards, I’m sure I would have lost her. I became impatient, so I picked up a sharp rock and threw it at her, taking aim as if throwing a discus. I don’t know whether I hit her or not, but I certainly heard a clack as it landed. But to my surprise, she didn’t seem to notice at all. She just went on as before.

‘Finally she turned into a grove of trees. I waited for a few minutes before going over and hiding behind a big pine and peering in. I saw there was a white-walled tomb inside. My heart at once tightened. So this was the yaksha’s lair! I was actually standing before it! I held my breath while considering whether to go in or not. What was inside? Would she be hiding behind the door waiting to strangle me with her claw-like hands when I went in? ...

‘I approached the tomb quietly. The door was unlatched. I heard yammering and rapid breathing. It was pitch black in the grove, and I had started to feel quite afraid. I no longer had the absurd romantic thoughts I had earlier. I was absolutely solemn. I felt a grave threat was imminent and that I had to consider my actions carefully.

‘Did I shrink back? No, not at all. You know how I am, Shi. The greater the danger, the more I leap into the fray. I have confidence in my resolution, and my courage and strength are all I need for support. Even if it were some sort of demonic creature, how could I shrink back, since I had followed it here? Perhaps I might subdue this demon from the past century.

‘So I set out on a wrong course. I steadied myself, cleared my throat, and forcefully pushed the door open. Because I used too much force and the hinges were rotten, the door fell with a bang to the floor. I quickly leapt inside and the first thing that met my eyes was a mighty black shadow rising from the foot of the walls. In an instant—I use the word “instant” but that hardly describes the extraordinary speed of the moment—the black shadow had escaped through the dense, overgrown grass to the back of the tomb. I turned to the foot of the walls where the demonic woman still lay all curled up and yammering. She stretched out her arms as though preparing to pounce. With the moonlight coming in at a slant, her shadow cast against the wall was even more terrifying. I locked my eyes on her because I knew that the keen gaze of a human can subdue demons. If your eyes waver for even an instant, they will attack you.

‘Suddenly, she rose, moving slowly but menacingly. Things were taking a bad turn, I felt, and I had better make the first move. I laughed savagely. Had you been there, you would have heard how very frightful my laughter was. I

leapt forward before she had a chance to get her claws in me and clutched her throat. With gritted teeth and clenched eyes, I squeezed my thumbs with all my strength. I immediately felt her limbs twitching and then giving up resistance. Was she dead? Had she died? I had apparently strangled a yaksha with the greatest of ease! I focused and carefully looked at the head which I still held in my hands. It was terrifying! Her long hair fell around the nape of her neck, her eyes protruded, and her mouth hung open so I could see the rows of white teeth inside ... But then, the sense of feel returned to my hands, and it seemed that I was clutching soft human skin, just like that of any ordinary person. There was no sign of anything unnatural at all. I pulled my hands back and the corpse lay splayed across the floor under the moonlight. Heavens! Even if I waited ten years, she wouldn't show her true form. This was her true form. She was human, just like me, absolutely human. A country woman! Only then did I realize that I had made a huge mistake. It defies belief that I would come here and strangle a country woman who was going to a secret rendezvous. I looked at her face and clothing but couldn't find anything resembling the woman I'd seen in the boat during the day. My hands began to ache and then all my joints seemed to go limp. I stood there dumbstruck for a moment before staggering out of the tomb to get away. I ran around confused, running all over the place before finding my way back to where I was staying. I sneaked inside quietly to sleep. No, not really to sleep. I couldn't sleep, and all I did was hide beneath the covers.

'I got up at dawn. Excusing myself with suddenly remembering some important office business that needed my immediate attention, I took leave of the family I was staying with and caught the first bus from Liuxia town to the city. In the waiting room of the bus station several people were talking about a deaf and dumb woman who had run away from home the night before and hadn't been heard from since.

'I waited no further. As soon as I got to Hangzhou, I hired a taxi to the station. I absolutely had to get to Shanghai as quickly as possible. Wherever I put my guilty hands, they still seemed to be holding that dreadful head. Everybody was peering at me as if they were all detectives. Maybe they could see from my face that I had committed murder the night before. I pulled down the brim of my hat to cover my brow. I didn't dare raise my head. I bought my ticket and quickly squeezed away from the wicket. But as I gave my ticket to the conductor, I couldn't help lifting my head, and right away I saw the white-clad woman from the boat standing there on the platform. She surely had magical powers that could lure people with her tricks of illusion to commit murder. Now that I understood, I was careful to avoid her so that she wouldn't see me.

‘Inside the train, I didn’t dare look at the other passengers. I even felt that I couldn’t let my hands be seen. So I pulled them into my sleeves and hunched over the window sill, skimming the landscape as it passed by. Not long after the train passed Jiaxing, I turned to look in the other direction and to my horror, I suddenly saw her head poking out of the window of the next carriage. She was facing into the wind with her hair swirling behind her, her mouth agape and her eyes bulging out. It was the same expression of terror on the woman’s face when I had strangled her the night before. Was her ghost now haunting me? What horrible condemnation would she inflict on me? I shrank into my seat and huddled fearfully in the corner until we reached Shanghai.

‘Nobody knew what I had done and I didn’t see the woman in white again. My hands still felt burning hot but I could think of several ways to relieve that. In the first day or two after returning to Shanghai, I hoped that I might more or less forget what I had done. But on the third day I went to buy some tobacco at the Wing On Department Store, and then once again I saw that woman in white from the train standing across from me at the candy counter. She even seemed to send me a warning smile, so my malady would thenceforth be lying in wait for me. I got away from the crowds and hurried home in a panic. I clearly had to forfeit my life to clear my debt, and now the creditor had arrived.

‘On the fourth day I went to see you. I was going to tell you my secret, partly to get some relief and partly to ask for some consolation, for I couldn’t stand it anymore. But I didn’t expect that the woman from the train would be waiting there for me as soon as I stepped through the door. My nerves were suddenly agitated, and horror, anxiety, and confusion attacked me. Therefore, therefore I ended up here ...’

A nurse opened the door.

‘Sir,’ she said, ‘the doctor advised you not to talk too much.’

‘Oh, I’ll stop. You can come in now, the milk has turned cold.’

After hearing my friend Bian Shiming’s story, I finally knew why he fainted from fear after seeing my cousin that day. Perhaps my cousin bore a striking resemblance to the woman in the boat or the country woman he strangled. And my cousin had indeed come to town on the same train as he had. On the third day she had gone shopping at Wing On. She told me that she had seen Bian Shiming, but that he was more timid than before, since he hurried off as soon as he saw her.

I suddenly remembered that my cousin and wife had arranged to come see him an hour hence, so I went out and called them, telling them that it wouldn’t be necessary.