

GALA

嘎啦

* The film adaptation of the same name was released in 2024

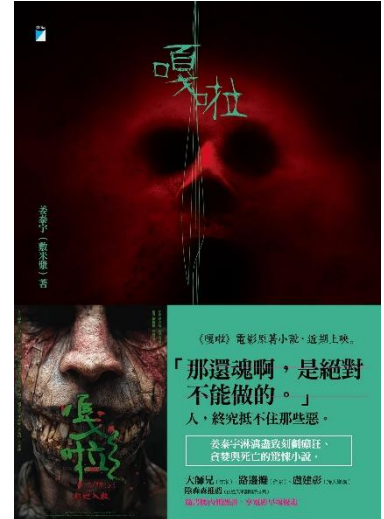
Three generations of terror are linked by a forbidden ritual and the shocking events in a soldier's diary. When the dead are called back to life, a horrific price must be paid in this stylish horror novel that echoes with cultish chants and the gnawing of flesh and bone.

“A horrific price must be paid by those who force the dead to return.”

In the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War, a few battalions of Republic of China soldiers escaped into Burma where they continued to conduct cross-border raids on communist forces before they were finally evacuated to Taiwan. In *Gala*, the diary of one of these soldiers is passed through three generations, cursing its author and all those who come to possess it.

The novel opens in the borderlands of Burma, where four lost ROC soldiers struggle to survive after being left for dead by their units. On the brink of starvation, they harbor fantasies of cannibalizing one another to stay alive. A strange boy whose face is always covered guides them to a village. As soon as they arrive, the villagers strike up a wild ritualistic chant, and the soldiers begin slaughtering one another before realizing that, in this ritual, all of them will become the sacrifice. These bizarre events are recorded in a soldier's diary which is carried back to Taiwan by a political warfare officer, where another bone-chilling saga begins to unfold.

Decades after the incidents in Burma, a Daoist priest conducts a ritual to drive away evil spirits that have been haunting a construction site of vacation homes in Taiwan. Midway through the ceremony the priest is suddenly assaulted by memories of his mentor, who, while serving as a soldier in Burma, had been asked to conduct a ritual to pacify the spirits of the four lost soldiers. This interference from the past transforms the ritual into something else entirely. Instead of driving spirits away, they



Category: Horror

Publisher: Aquarius

Date: 6/2024

Pages: 304

Length: 84,481 characters
(approx. 54,900 words in English)

Rights contact:

bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

are called back to life, a process which demands human sacrifices. As the malevolent spirits exact their toll, not a single worker at the construction site will be spared.

In the present day, a group of vloggers is invited to film at a resort built on the site of the unfinished vacation homes. Their videos go viral after supernatural events are caught on camera, motivating the vloggers to delve deeper into the dark mysteries of the resort, and thereby exposing themselves to a blood-debt that is yet to be fully paid.

With its dark cults, forbidden rituals, and acts of self-cannibalism, *Gala* is suffused with a Lovecraftian atmosphere of dread that will test the nerves of even the most cool-headed readers. Author Chiang Tai-Yu relates events in ghastly detail, but resists giving a full explanation of the terrifying hauntings, instead focusing on the human tendency to subjugate ourselves to desire, thereby laying the seeds of our own destruction. In the end, readers can only guess whether the terror will ever truly finish.

Chiang Tai-Yu 姜泰宇

Chiang Tai-Yu is the bestselling author of nearly a dozen novels including *You Turn Around and I'll Go Downstairs*. *Car Washers*, his memoir about losing his eyesight and working at a car wash, was shortlisted for the 2019 Taipei Literature Award, while his short story *Thirty Miles Due East* was a recipient of the 2024 Lin Rung San Prize. He also writes under the pseudonym Fumijiang (Spreading Rice Milk).

GALA

By Chiang Tai-Yu

Translated by Sarah-Jayne Carver

Part One

Chapter One: The Blown-Up Bridge

Mou Chang-tsai dropped to the ground on the path beside the mountain. He wanted to keep going through the grass, but his legs had stopped listening to him. He used to run like this as a child when he was stealing vegetables from the woman next door. More recently, he hadn't been able to outrun the Nationalist government so now he'd been drafted and was fleeing from the Japanese. He had spent the last few days slogging through muddy water after his squadmate from his hometown, Feng Wan-chen, whom they all called Second Steed, had insisted they should head for higher ground. It was the only way to escape the mud. Anyone who fell just a few steps behind would find their feet engulfed in the torrent of muddy water. Mou Chang-tsai stared at the mud-covered soldier behind him, but before he could make out who it was, there was a bang, and the man was gone.

Who could have known the bridge would just explode out of nowhere?

The small bag of rations he'd been carrying was almost empty and there didn't seem to be any other supplies. Second Steed was staring blankly up at the sky like a fried grasshopper. It was a dark grey color that filled them with a deep sense of unease. Their comrade, Lu Ming-pao (known as Big Loot) had foolishly started to pee right next to Second Steed, so Second Steed got up and slapped him in the face. Unperturbed, Big Loot smiled and rubbed his cheek as though he was completely unbothered by it all. Mou Chang-tsai emptied the muddy water from his canteen into his helmet. The small, primate-like child they called the Monkey Ghost was standing next to a tree and making a campfire. He had kept his face covered all day, with only his eyes showing.

Second Steed saw Big Loot staring straight at their few remaining rations, so he hastily gathered them to his chest and went to kick Big Loot again. Big Loot dodged him and kept smiling even as he nearly fell into the fire.

"There aren't any villages up ahead," said Pan, appearing on the road in front of them. They saw his bare feet, then his tattered, blackened uniform, then finally his rifle still firmly slung over his shoulder. When he first heard Pan's voice, Mou Chang-tsai had been biting into his tasteless, mud-soaked rations and thinking about how there was a particularly desolate air to the smoke from the campfire. Pan was from Ningbo but spoke with a Beijing accent. He was very tall and carried his gun with him at all times. He never told them how many bullets he had left.

Big Loot drank the remaining ration-flavored mud water. Nobody wanted to move. Other than the Monkey Ghost who'd been inexplicably following them, they each sat slumped against a tree hugging their legs, or lay flat on their backs in the same grasshopper-like way Second Steed

had done earlier. The Monkey Ghost was nowhere to be seen, but no one went looking for him. Big Loot seemed like he hadn't eaten enough, and was mumbling to himself about knife-cut noodles, braised noodles, and green beans. His words made them all hungry. After a short while, the Monkey Ghost came back carrying something they didn't recognize in his jacket. He threw it into a helmet that had a layer of mud at the bottom and stared wide-eyed at what was inside. Second Steed went over to see what it was and discovered that Big Loot had drunk all the leftover soup. He was so angry that he rose to his feet as if to kick Big Loot a few more times, but thankfully Pan stopped him.

It smelled pretty good; it must have been meat. No one asked the Monkey Ghost what kind of meat it was, and they wouldn't have got an answer anyway. For the most part, the Monkey Ghost didn't speak and kept his face covered at all times. It seemed he'd fled with everyone else on that second day, and he'd been following the four of them in silence ever since. When he first joined them, Second Steed hadn't said anything about it since they still had enough canned food. Back then none of them could have imagined that they'd end up having to flee this far, so Second Steed told the Monkey Ghost he could join them. The Monkey Ghost didn't make any effort to be polite and sat far away from the rest of them while he ate. There wasn't anything specifically bad about him, and he was helpful when it came to building fires and finding water. Muddy water, that is. It meant they weren't too concerned about having an extra person join them, except for the time when he got overly enthusiastic and tried to help Pan by grabbing his gun. He received a strong reprimand from Pan which they weren't sure if he understood, but he kept his distance from Pan for a while afterwards.

Mou Chang-tsai hugged his knees to his chest for a bit, then lay down on the ground. Big Loot was still shouting about Shanxi noodles, and from the other side of the path. Pan said with a smile, "Look at us acting like we barely have a care in the world. We've had enough to drink and now we're just lying around. We don't even have to rush to rejoin our regiment." He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and turned to Big Loot, "When I first joined the army, the food was nowhere as good as what we get here in the Expeditionary Force. I went hungry for so long that I lost a few centimeters off my height. The food we get here is so much better. With these C-rations we get from the United States they give us beef every day, as well as tea, cigarettes and vitamin tablets."

Mou Chang-tsai licked his lips, remembering the slightly bitter effect of the tart tea brewed from the leaves, which always felt like gulping down something solid. He touched the cigarettes in his breast pocket and thought to himself, *I'll save them for later, we don't know when we'll rejoin the regiment or when supplies will arrive.*

Pan was so used to keeping watch that he didn't shake the others awake until the night was already half over. When he was shaken awake, Mou Chang-tsai's hand went to his breast pocket and found that his bayonet was still there. There was no moon that night and the light of the stars wasn't enough to see by, so he accidentally stepped on Big Loot who mumbled something before lying back down again. Big Loot's real name, Lu Ming-pao, carried connotations of luminous

treasure. As Mou Chang-tsai continued to stroke the bayonet in his pocket, his eyes tried to make out Big Loot's neck in the dark but he couldn't see it clearly.

He couldn't really see anything at all.

*

"Why the fuck are you writing a supervisor's log at a time like this?" Pan snorted, striding over to Mou Chang-tsai and staring him down.

Pan's full name was Pan Te-sheng, meaning "to triumph over an opponent". He had a long scar which ran from under his left eye to his lips which he insisted was a cut he'd gotten from a strange tree on one of his marches. No matter how you looked at it, the scar seemed more like a knife cut, but even though all the others saw it, they never said anything so that Pan wouldn't lose face.

Early the next morning as they prepared to leave, Pan declared that if they couldn't meet up with the regiment, they would have to head for Honghe or Mengzi Airport. He'd received word that they needed to prepare to retreat.

"What kind of retreat? And retreat to where?" asked Big Loot, but Pan couldn't explain himself. In any case, they would have to go to Mengzi because the Yuanjiang Bridge had been blown up. They had no way to retrace their steps, and would have to take a huge detour.

Also, was Second Steed getting sick? He was up early, or more accurately he'd been the last one of them on watch, and his face looked puffy and sullen. When they were eating the boiled rations, Big Loot had wanted more but Second Steed had berated him for it. Second Steed told him that when they'd first received the crackers, some people who hadn't known any better had eaten too many in one go and then drunk a lot of water. The mixture had blocked up their intestines and caused them to vomit everything back up again.

Mou Chang-tsai touched the blade in his pocket again. The wind had picked up and a sandstorm was rolling in. Southern Yunnan winters were piercingly cold, and even though the last few days had been warmer, there was still a slight chill in the air as they gradually moved into the mountains. Mou Chang-tsai found himself looking at Big Loot's neck again, but it made him feel even colder.

The Monkey Ghost was right at the front of their small squadron. Not that Mou Chang-tsai particularly cared who went first, but he did wonder if the Monkey Ghost was leading the way, whether intentionally or not. Maybe he knew where Mengzi was? Mou Chang-tsai held the pen cap in his mouth while he packed up the logbook and carefully put it away. The cover read: *Supervisor's Log: 414th Infantry Division of the 95th Regiment*. Mou Chang-tsai figured that if they ever rejoined their regiment, they would need to show it to their division commander. The wind whistled around them. Pan was at the head of the group, and the Monkey Ghost, who seemed to be native to the region, was following along beside him and looked like he was sniffing something. They were followed by Big Loot and Second Steed, with Mou Chang-tsai bringing up the rear.

Mou Chang-tsai froze for a moment, suddenly remembering that the Monkey Ghost hadn't simply started following them. In the beginning, it had just been Mou Chang-tsai and Second Steed left struggling through the mud together. They had been running and that was when they'd seen Big Loot, who was from a neighboring squadron. It was just the three of them for a while, and then they'd been joined by Pan, but they weren't sure which division he was from. He'd brought the Monkey Ghost with him. Now they didn't have enough food, so what was the point of dwelling on where the Monkey Ghost came from or when he arrived? Mou Chang-tsai shook his head. There definitely wasn't enough food, and they didn't know if Pan actually had any bullets. It was also January, which meant they hadn't seen any wild animals, not even a roe deer, so even if he did have bullets in that gun, there wasn't anything for them to kill. The wind kept whistling. They had been walking towards the forest for most of the morning, but it seemed like they would never reach it. There were no other sounds beside the wind, their own breathing, and Big Loot muttering about the pain in his feet. His shoes might have been pulled off his feet during the flood, or he might have just thrown them away.

Once the exhaustion had passed, only numbness remained. Mou Chang-tsai thought about how the word for numbness, 麻木, was made up of so many characters for the word tree: 木. It made him wonder, *why the hell were there so many goddamn trees?*

*

The group lay down when they got to the edge of the forest. They were going to wait a while before going in because it was getting late and there would be a lot of snakes and the air would be thick with miasma. On the verge of nightfall, Mou Chang-tsai and Big Loot went into the forest to gather firewood and it was already slightly damp for some reason. Big Loot began gathering firewood from the ground, while Mou Chang-tsai took out his single-edged blade and hacked away at some branches, figuring they would be drier than the wood from the ground.

"Why are my hands so weak?" muttered Mou Chang-tsai to himself.

Big Loot was talking loudly about how the deputy commander was from a village near his hometown so if they linked up with the regiment again, he'd be able to get them extra food. Mou Chang-tsai tried to remember the deputy commander's name while he sliced through the branches. Was it Tan Chung? As he was hacking away at the branches, he suddenly heard something behind him to his left. Big Loot was standing around idly up ahead, so Mou Chang-tsai turned around to look.

It was so quiet.

In a split second, everything had gone silent and Mou Chang-tsai felt a cold shiver run through him like he'd been on the receiving end of a practical joke. His hand tightened around the blade, and he scooped up the branches he'd been collecting under his left arm. What if there was a demon living in the forest? Mou Chang-tsai told Big Loot they had to get out of the forest as fast as they could. It didn't matter if they didn't have enough firewood.

"Shouldn't we get more?" asked Big Loot cluelessly, looking doubtful.

Mou Chang-tsai didn't know how to explain, so he just yelled, "Deputy Commander Tan Chung says you have to get out of here right now!"

Satisfied with this, Big Loot grabbed the firewood and staggered after him, breaking into a run.

As soon as they got out of the forest, they realized Second Steed and Pan had gotten into a fight, and now Second Steed was lying on the ground.

"Stop! What the hell are you guys doing?!"

Mou Chang-tsai threw down the firewood and rushed over to stop Pan.

"The kid was spouting nonsense like he was possessed, how could I not hit him?!" shouted Pan.

It was hard to pull Pan away. His big, strong body was sitting on Second Steed's stomach, and it was impossible to tell how many punches he'd thrown already.

Pan sprawled on the ground, gasping for breath. Second Steed lay flat on his back staring up at the sky, then he rolled over and spat out a tooth.

The nearby forest was like a spectator watching the whole thing unfold, and the whole group of disheveled, hungry, foul-smelling men had no idea what to do. The Monkey Ghost was gone; maybe he'd gotten scared and run away.

Second Steed hadn't spoken since spitting out his molar. Mou Chang-tsai looked at Pan.

"We were making a fire," said Pan resentfully. "I wanted to go out hunting, but then out of nowhere Second Steed said the bridge had been blown up by Commander Sun of the 237th Infantry Division. He kept saying that everybody had died in the explosion, and Commander Sun hadn't spared a thought for us. He said we'd never find our regiment, that we'd never make it back." Pan was a member of the 237th Infantry Division. He had been in the vanguard when they crossed the Yuanjiang Bridge.

Mou Chang-tsai opened his mouth but decided not to say anything.

When the muddy water had all come flooding in, Mou Chang-tsai had heard someone yelling that Commander Sun had blown up the bridge. Mou Chang-tsai suddenly felt a deep sense of isolation. The feeling had been buried deep in his mind since that moment and now it surged over him like the water of the Yuanjiang River, filled with yellow mud and overwhelming everything in its path. As he looked across at the unfamiliar territory surrounding them and thought about how they were just four rancid, isolated men, it occurred to him that probably none of them could accept being abandoned like that. To be discarded like the rotten flesh on the soles of their feet.

Mou Chang-tsai sat down beside Second Steed and tried to pull him up, but his body didn't have any strength left, so he just lay down on the ground beside him.

"What the hell happened?" asked Mou Chang-tsai.

"I'm not scared of him. Commander Sun was the one who blew up the bridge," replied Second Steed.

Mou Chang-tsai leapt up when he saw Pan move as if he was about to kick Second Steed again, but Big Loot quickly grabbed him.

“Why fucking bother talking about it now?” demanded Mou Chang-tsai.

“Why can’t we talk about it?” said Second Steed.

“When did you realize this?”

“I’ve always known. I’ve known all along...”

He made Second Steed pick up his tooth. It was a Guizhou custom that you shouldn’t lose anything while travelling in the wilderness, otherwise you would die a terrible death. In a flash, the Monkey Ghost’s campfire suddenly burst into life. No one even knew when he’d come back. They took inventory of the remaining food and the Monkey Ghost brought over some water to boil the last of the dried meat. They threw it in together with a few of the compressed crackers and some unnamed fruit. It was the only food they’d had all day and chewing it made Mou Chang-tsai’s tongue hurt. There still wasn’t enough firewood and he was worried they would wake up in the middle of the night from the cold. As night fell, several of them lay down because they could conserve energy by moving around less, and in turn they would feel less hungry.

Pan took the first watch as usual but stood a little further away. The sound of his bare feet scuffing against the ground as he walked back and forth was annoying, but none of them had the energy to say anything about it. The nearby forest was completely silent, and while ordinarily it should have been enough to make his blood run cold, Mou Chang-tsai found himself wondering who the hell could care about demons and ghosts when they were already starving to death.

While the campfire crackled in the background, Mou Chang-tsai closed his eyes and thought back to the day when he’d escaped the flood. He hadn’t believed them at first when he’d heard people yelling that Commander Sun had blown up the bridge. How could he have blown it up? Some of his own men were still on that bridge and the bomb had cut the regiment in half. And what about the troops who hadn’t crossed the bridge yet, were they just cannon fodder? Mou Chang-tsai felt like a slab of cured meat. He’d been dosed in salt and now he was hanging in some obscure corner of the world being swung around by the wind, dangling so loosely that he might fall at any moment. The most pitiful part was that he’d been forgotten here, left in this dilapidated place where even vermin couldn’t grow, and his rotten bones would slowly shrivel down into hard pebbles.

He desperately wanted to cry, but his body was as empty as his canteen.

As the campfire crackled on, the branches became thinner and thinner, just like him. Mou Chang-tsai went to stroke the bayonet in his pocket but ended up touching his own ribs. For a split second, he almost felt ready to stab himself with the blade so he could see how the meat around the bones tasted. In his village back home, the old lady next door occasionally cooked pork ribs and shared them with him. They’d tasted so good that they didn’t even discard the bones when they were done, they’d been so delicious that he’d wanted to swallow his own tongue. While he lay there thinking about it, he stared at Big Loot who was lying a few meters away in the faint, flickering light from the campfire. He kept his gaze fixed on Big Loot’s neck until his eyes became sore and numb, before he eventually closed them.

"Deputy Commander Tan Chung, this is Lu Ming-pao reporting for duty," mumbled Big Loot in his sleep, completely unaware that Mou Chang-tsai had been staring so intently at him and imagining gliding something across his neck.

Mou Chang-tsai turned his head and his eyes met Second Steed's gaze. He couldn't help feeling apprehensive. *Surely Second Steed didn't see it in my eyes?* He thought to himself. *But what if he did? No, he's over on the other side, there's no way he could have seen what I was looking at.*

"Why aren't you asleep?" he whispered.

Second Steed didn't say anything, he just licked his lips. They reminded Mou Chang-tsai of a fish he'd seen as a child with half its scales scraped off.

"Something bad is going to happen to us," said Second Steed. Then he went silent.

Big Loot rolled over in his sleep and Mou Chang-tsai figured he should get up. He wandered over to Pan so he could take over as lookout. If he couldn't lie down, he might as well stand for a while. Pan didn't bother with pleasantries and went to lie down, keeping his distance from Second Steed and positioning himself on the far side with Big Loot between them. His disgusting bare feet were right beside Big Loot's face, and Big Loot's putrid feet were up against Pan. What the hell? At this angle they looked like a divinatory trigram from the I-ching. Mou Chang-tsai turned the blade over in his hand again, then took off his shoes and sat hunched on the ground to trim his toenails, stealing glances at the others now and again.

What about the Monkey Ghost?

Wait, where was the Monkey Ghost?

He felt the slightest sensation of breath against his neck, as though someone were right behind him, or it could have just been a tickling feeling from gnats in the air. Mou Chang-tsai kept his head down and silently counted to three, then switched the blade to his left hand and swiped it behind him. When he turned his head, he saw there was nothing there. Was the Monkey Ghost deliberately messing with him? Whatever it was out there was definitely big enough to have been the Monkey Ghost, but Mou Chang-tsai had still chosen to get his knife out and would kill if needed. It was war; who hadn't had someone die on their watch? Accidental deaths happened. When you were standing lookout on an empty stomach, what could you do?

He'd probably used a bit too much force; as he swung his blade through the air, he ended up falling forward and his right temple collided with something. His whole body was feeling woozy when he suddenly noticed glittering lights coming from what looked like two impossibly deep, dark pits up in the tree. They drew him in, especially now he was so ravenous and emaciated. It took only take one glance to reel him in completely.

As he slowly got his breath back, Mou Chang-tsai stared up at the two beams of light and was slowly able to make out the Monkey Ghost in the faint starlight. Mou Chang-tsai examined the tree for a moment and realized that the Monkey Ghost was perched about five or six meters up but there were barely any branches between him and the ground. How on earth had he gotten up there? Mou Chang-tsai sat up and reached out his hand, motioning the Monkey Ghost to get down. The Monkey Ghost clung to the tree trunk, swayed once to the left and then swung himself twice round the trunk and down to the ground before cautiously sneaking towards Mou Chang-tsai.

“What were you doing up there?” he asked, tightening his grip on the bayonet.

The Monkey Ghost stared at Mou Chang-tsai and let out a sharp whistling sound through his nose. His face was obscured by a cloth and he was dressed in a bizarre outfit that seemed to be made out of linen. Mou Chang-tsai guessed it might be traditional clothing from either the Bai or Dai ethnic groups. The Monkey Ghost didn't say anything for a long time, but after a while he pointed one finger at the sky, first left then right, before pointing at his eyes. *Oh*, thought Mou Chang-tsai. *You've been helping keep watch, good job little guy.*

They were four full-grown men and a monkey-like child traversing the ravines of Southern Yunnan and running out of food. Mou Chang-tsai thought about how the group of them were like festering sores on this spit of land, soaked rotten by the Yuanjiang River, and he wondered whether he should use the bayonet in his hand to slice them off one by one. He let the Monkey Ghost sit beside him. The Monkey Ghost studied him carefully for a while, then sat down with a shiver. Mou Chang-tsai smiled and patted his head.