

My Uncle China

By Eric Chiang

My uncle China has been seen and heard many times before, but his actions still surprise. On most days, he leaves his white whiskers and billowy beard unshaved, with the latter drooping down past his chest. A silk robe around his body, he carries a scroll in his left hand. "This is my invention," he reminds us with a smile. "This is the result of four thousand years of history." While walking along and commenting on the birds and flowers around him, he quotes Confucius: "If a man sets his heart on benevolence, then he will be free from evil."

But on other days, he appears without whiskers or a beard. Clean-shaven, he wears a Mao suit and does not smile for a second. His ire is palpable, and his voice strident without the least bit of quivering. He quotes Lu Xun: "We have been injured, faced humiliation, and yet, we are unable to say what we should." He slams his fist on the wall and waits for us all to stare at him worriedly. He shouts, "We have two paths before us: one is to keep our ancient texts and die, and the other is to abandon our ancient texts and live." We do not know what he is talking about, and he says that we are all "conservatives."

Then, on the last of days, he appears in a pinstriped suit with a short brown beard but no whiskers. He does not carry anything in his hands, but in his pocket is a wallet with two credit cards and an identification card. He wears a watch on his left wrist and scans the floor periodically for lurking mice. When he spots a brown mouse in the corner of our dining room, he asks us if we own a cat. He says, "I don't care if it's a white cat or a black cat. It's a good cat so long as it catches mice." We say we don't own a cat, and he rushes out to the pet store where he promptly purchases a black cat for a thousand Yuan.

This is my uncle, and this is China. On any given day, he can appear in any one of the three forms. Yet, my family loves him all the same. Whenever he comes, my mother and I bake a chocolate cake for him and put candles and whipped cream on top. He loves the candles but hates the chocolate frosting and whipped cream. He says that it's not traditional enough and that Litchi paste would be better. We disagree, but we laugh all the same until he abruptly tells us that it's time for him to leave.

We beg him to stay, and most of the time, he does. But today is different: though he arrived in the third form with a business suit and a watch on his left wrist, he waves me off and says that he has more important things to attend to. I ask him what, and he responds, "Little boy, life has been hard for me recently. There have been protests, and people have died."

I shake my head. "Why have people died?"

"People have died because their needs have not been met. We have people that hate us and people that live in poverty."

"Have you asked others for help?" I shrug.

"No, these are internal issues," he says, "and I doubt that any of you would be able to help me much."

I frown and say, "My mom tells me that I should seek help from others whenever I am in trouble. I think you can do the same."

He shakes his head angrily. "My issues are my issues, and your issues are your issues."

Then suddenly, I decide to hug him. I decide to relieve his anger, and I say, "Uncle, you've always been so nice to me. Why won't you let me be nice to you for once?"

I kiss him on the chin, and he smiles. His anger is instantly relieved, and he says, "I've seen so much in the last fifty years. Fifty years ago, my people were starving, and my country was a mess. Forty years ago, my country was even worse off, and even then, I did not ask for help. I was too proud, and so many died. Ten years later, I changed my ways and removed my Mao suit. I put on this suit, and I wanted to be just like you. Ten years after that, my people had enough to eat, and ten years after that, my people could buy toys and televisions just like you. Now, my people want all the things that you have: all the toys and all the happiness, but there are some that can't afford to buy any toys or televisions. That is why there has been so much trouble."

"Well, I think my family and I can help."

He nods his head and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Now that I've heard you speak, I do not think that you are a little boy anymore. You know a lot, and I think you are right: I cannot afford to be like I was forty years ago. Forty years ago was when my people died. At the time, I tried to do what was right, but I did not have the resources myself. I failed, and now, I cannot let my ego take control of my actions. I must put the interests of my people above the interests of my ego."

I hear my uncle say this, and I break into tears. Small droplets of water run down my cheek and onto my shirt. I am touched, for I have never seen my uncle act this way before. “My family and friends can help you, and we will not make you feel bad. We are equals after all. Equals on this planet and equals forevermore.”