

*Red is the color of gouqi*

I don't like the word China. Or its native sibling, zhongguo. Bite and it bleeds communism red. Like gunned, glossy-eyed soldiers marching to patriotic music, or a crimson too bright and proud for the hell of 1949. Like the gelled, shiny hair of Mao even in death, the stiff, impeccable suits of Xi.

How can I say China when I mean the toddler happiness of discovering gouqi in xiaomizhou or the dusky Beijing nights smelling of yexiao, musty rain, and city lights? Or the sleepaway trains that fill with steamy, savory fangbianmian by 11 o'clock? Or just meaning me, me. Colored faintly red by the blood in my veins, same as anybody else.

Red is the color of communism. And gouqi.

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SPECIAL NOTE:

This piece deliberately weaves into the text various Mandarin Chinese words and phrases (in pinyin, a transliteration system) as well as cultural references. For non-native/non-heritage readers, here is a glossary.

1. *gouqi*: wolfberries. When dried, they look like bright red raisins and taste gently sweet and soft.
2. *zhongguo*: China.
3. "...*the hell of 1949*:" the Chinese Civil War (between the Nationalists and Communists) ended in 1949. Patriotic red scarves worn as part of Chinese children's school uniforms are said to be dyed red with the blood of fallen soldiers.
4. "*Mao*:" Mao Zedong, first Chairman of the People's Republic of China after 1949. Regarded by both the West and China as one of the most important figures in Chinese history. Glorifying images of Mao were mass-produced for propaganda during his time.

5. “Xi.” Xi Jinping, the current President of China.
6. *xiaomizhou*: millet porridge, mostly eaten for breakfast. Sometimes seasoned with dried *gouqi*.
7. *yexiao*: literally “night nourishment.” A meal eaten late at night, often by trendy young people out in the city with friends.
8. *fangbianmian*: literally “convenient noodles.” Most people in China bring instant ramen for lunch or dinner on train rides during that time. In fact, there are often special hot-water stations installed on trains partially for that specific purpose.