

# Cat Skin

by Sheung-King

Because the default browser is Google Chrome still and because the VPN needs to be on for me to read most of the things I think I need to read, I need to identify which of the nine images in blurry little squares contain a boat to prove that I am not a robot. To whom am I not a robot? I identify the images that contain ships. I know the difference between a ship and a boat. I am not a robot. I identify the images that contain bridges and then the images that contain bushes, and then I turn my VPN off and on again to see if the page will load. It doesn't. And now, I have forgotten what I was trying to load, and now I want to access it even more. I switch my VPN's location from Hong Kong to Santa Monica, which is the recommended setting, but it still doesn't work so I change it to Tokyo, to Toronto, to South Korea, to Vancouver, and when I set the location to Alsace, just as it finally works, my doorbell rings so I get up from lying on the couch with the laptop pressed against my chest and my chin tucked into my neck to open the door for a man in a blue windbreaker and blue helmet with a white Alipay logo on the top. He hands me a white plastic bag that holds a plastic container that contains rice noodles that are separated from the hot soup by a transparent plastic compartmentalizer, and though I always request that the restaurant not give me disposable utensils, I still receive a pair of disposable chopsticks and a white plastic spoon, and now I find disposable utensils to be too convenient, and now I almost never use my dishwasher and now, because I almost always only use the chopsticks, I have a stack of disposable white spoons inside one of the draws in my kitchen; I remember asking a friend about this; I wonder if this friend of mine is still my friend because one day she stopped talking to me, and I stopped talking to her, sensing she was avoiding me, and it has been a month, and maybe I stopped caring if she's still a friend of mine or not, but the rice noodles remind me of the time when I pointed out that the restaurants give us utensils though we ask them not to, she reminded me that my preferences don't matter, that the option is there because the government tells tech companies to include such options and that it is better for the restaurants to give us utensils regardless because in cases where we click the no-utensils button, which is green, by mistake, and we actually don't have utensils, we won't be able to eat the noodles

and we'd blame the restaurant for not giving us utensils, and we will be mad at them, and because we won't get to eat the noodles, we won't know how good the noodles are and we won't order noodles from them again.

It is better to prevent problems than to solve them later. It is easier to prevent problems than to solve them later. It is common practice to anticipate problems. It is common practice to make rules to prevent problems because the problems rules cause are problems that can be anticipated.

Maybe I should start cooking at home. Maybe I should buy a cat. Maybe *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is useless for international school teachers who teach rich kids. If I give them tests all the time, maybe fewer of them will be playing on their phones. Maybe none of that will work. Maybe I should turn off my VPN and start browsing for stuff I think I need on Taobao. Maybe I'm a bad teacher. Maybe I should take a shit. Maybe the article I was trying to load is from the New York Times, which is *very* blocked, but maybe it doesn't matter that I can't access the article; maybe not too many people around me will be able to read the article either and maybe the noise, the metallic noise of the subway train slowly slowing down as it reaches the subway station downstairs from my apartment—the sound of metal scratching against metal—is making me want to have sushi instead; maybe the noise is making me want to die.

I pick from a new set of blurry images the ones that display fire hydrants. Another train passes by. Maybe I actually like the noise of metal scratching against metal. I used to sit on my grandmother's balcony in her old apartment, in Kowloon, in Hong Kong, in the early 2000s, where there were too many cars and minibuses and double-deckers and trains and people and buildings. There were way too many buildings, and they were very close to each other and there was always construction, and maybe, because it is impossible to clearly identify one noise from another, I enjoyed sitting on the balcony watching, amidst that chaos, amidst that peace, the subway passing by from between the gaps of the old residential buildings. I was twelve or thirteen and eight and I am now remembering the noise of Hong Kong as a child in Hong Kong, but now I am an adult, a Hong Kongese-Chinese-Canadian adult working in Shenzhen, in China, in 2021 thinking about Hong Kong and remembering the fact that at some point, when I was eight, or thirteen, or twelve, my grandfather passed away and my grandmother moved to the same private apartment complex as my parents, near the Hong Kong International Airport, where there was less noise. I could hear the sound of planes but could not see them.

I learned this today: the twelve-year-old boy I interviewed and admitted to the school I work at shoved his fingers up another kid's asshole during gym class. I did not see this happen; I think about it as I take a shit. This boy also told a teacher that on September 18<sup>th</sup> he placed the Japanese Flag on the floor and stepped on it, and on his first day at school, when he was asked to draw the map of China, he included Vietnam. I saw the map he drew and my colleague stopped this student from continuing to draw the map when he tried to expand the Chinese border to include all of Mongolia, and because when the other students asked him why his map is shaped differently, he started talking about how we need to expand our borders and the other students became afraid thinking that we soon need to go to war so as to conquer more territory, so as to put pressure on the Japanese, so as to fight the Americans. We later learned from this student's parents that he learned all of this from TikTok and bilibili.

It is better to cause problems.

The friend I thought a moment ago was no longer my friend WeChats me, asks me if I want to grab a drink at a place where a friend of hers, who is rich and young and male and has, she says in the voice message, questionable taste in shoes and a bottle he needs to finish before midnight or else the bar will keep it, and when I arrive at the bar my friend is alone and her friend has just left with her other friend, leaving behind the bottle of whiskey, which is Taiwanese. I do not ask my friend if she is still my friend. We talk about a thing, and that one thing leads to another thing, and at some point she starts telling me about this school she once worked at when she came back to China after finishing her Master's in the US or the UK or Canada or Australia. She tells me about how terrible this school was and how the president, who is a businessman franchising this school, would ask young Chinese women, teachers, to sing for him in revealing black dresses on Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter and he likes it when people call him 關董 (President Kwan). Basiz School (I'm certain I'm not spelling it right) has schools across China. They know that parents, like expat teachers and parents, have money and parents have kids and, to prevent any potential financial problems, the school needs to be compatible with existing problems, need to make sure money is made, and for schools to make money in China those who teach English must be white, and those who are white get a full week off to attend their sister's wedding in Arizona whereas a local teacher, who is pregnant and wants one day off to go to the hospital with her husband, gets her request rejected by her manager, who is Chinese.

關董 enjoys the fact that the young Chinese women need to compete with each other for the chance to perform for him. Each time, only three women from each campus get to perform. At this point, my friend who I think is still my friend is a little drunk, and there is still a third of the bottle left, and I start drinking faster, and she tells me that for Chinese New Year the young Chinese women are in qipao and they are called 禮儀小姐 (Ms... “manner”?), and the tech coordinator, Jared, is a pervert who stalked her, accessed her search history, and when she found out (because Jared told her) and she told HR about it, HR told her to stop using work devices for personal purposes and told her that if she doesn’t tell anyone about this incident, she will not be in trouble for abusing her use of the school’s technologies.

My friend pauses for a bit and says that her former school is very clean and marketable and all the students move on to Ivy League schools and the parents are very happy with the school, and her contract was long-term and she was paid well and everything was very organized and, other than the things she just mentioned, the daily operation and policies that the school has in place work much better than anywhere else she knows of in the South of China and back then, when she was twenty-three and returning from the US or the UK or whatever, it was the best job she could ask for.

She takes out her phone, tells me she's ordering a cab and that I can finish the rest of the bottle, and three minutes later she tells me she's leaving. I still do not know if she was mad at me for the last month.

I leave as well. An electric car that has green doors and looks like a toaster comes to pick me up. I have an accent. When I tell the driver where to get off the highway, he interrupts me, asks if I'm Korean. I tell him I am not. Japanese? I tell him I am not but do not tell him I grew up in Hong Kong. He tells me that if I *am* Japanese he will kick me out. I glimpse a slight smirk on the driver's face in the rear-view mirror. I remember when I was ten or eleven or twelve, I watched as someone I liked drew a cat, a small cat with small eyes and small ears and a tiny tail, and when I returned home, and I didn't realize I was doing this until I did it, I imagined I was her as I drew the same cat and I imagined that the cat was alive, and I imagined killing the cat and skinning it and, sitting in this quiet electric car, I remember that when I imagined skinning the cat I was drawing, which was her cat, I was smiling.