

Plotters in Peking

Peking, March 1974:

Even for a senior Party cadre like Cheng Ching, employed as he was in the most secret of the eight divisions in the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party, being admitted to Chung Nai Hai was still an intimidating affair. The vast complex, formerly part of the royal gardens of the Forbidden City, was reserved exclusively for Party leaders and top officials. It was surrounded by vermilion walls and guarded by more than two thousand elite soliders of the Central Garrison Corps, known as Unit 8341 in the People's Liberation Army.

Cheng Ching had been invited for dinner there by his adoptive father, General Yeh, who was both the Deputy Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission and the Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army.

As Cheng Ching presented his identification papers at one of the guard posts, he felt a niggling sense of unease. Ordinarily, his security passes, coupled with an invitation by General Yeh, would have ensured speedy access. But times were distempered. The long-running Cultural Revolution had brought the country to the brink of economic collapse. He had seen the dismal evidence during his journeys to and from his village at Thirsty Hills.

In such circumstances, the hunt for scapegoats and traitors grew more intense by the day. High office offered no protection. General Peng Te-huai, hero of the revolution and General Yeh's former Commander-in-Chief in Korea, was rotting in prison because he had criticized Chairman Mao before the Politburo for using state funds for private pleasures. Liu Shao-chi, the Head of State, argued for General Peng's rehabilitation and got hounded out of office and declared an anti-Party traitor for his principles. His death five years ago had still not been announced, turning him into a non-person.

Cheng Ching waited patiently as the guards to examine his documents and the basket of fresh fruit he had brought as a gift. He wondered what the invitation to dinner portended. Had his adoptive father been caught up in some high-level tussle for power?

After the guards had been satisfied, a detail of three escorted him with formal courtesy to the residence of General Yeh.

"Good to see you back," General Yeh exclaimed, extending his right hand.

Cheng Ching took it and proffered the fruits. "A trifle, Erh Fu. My parents send greetings. Thank you for having me to dinner, so soon after my return."

"Why are you standing on ceremony? You're part of the family. Our home is yours." the General said. He was lean and erect, though his closely cropped hair was grey. High cheekbones, hollow cheeks and a pointed chin gave his face a curiously triangular aspect.

"Your parents well?"

"Quite. Thank you."

"Good. Always nice to know that old comrades are well."

Cheng Ching detected a slightly too hearty timbre to the General's voice and his senses triggered an immediate alert.

The sound of conversation brought the General's wife from the kitchen with cups of tea. She was chubby and beaming and was effusive in her welcome.

"Aiyah!" she exclaimed, when the General passed her the fruit. "Why you mess around wasting money?" She smiled broadly and wagged a motherly finger. The Yehs had no children and Cheng Ching was the closest thing they had to a son. After a while, she excused herself. "You two have a nice chat. I'll prepare something special for dinner."

"Don't go to any trouble!" Cheng Ching called.

The mistress of the house dismissed the remark with a wave of her hand as she disappeared back into the kitchen.

"My father asked me to bring a letter of greetings," Cheng Ching reported, presenting the missive with both hands in accordance with etiquette.

"Your father's letters are always pure joy. He can convey things by not mentioning them! The letter will keep." The General pocketed the letter and added: "How's life at Thirsty Hills in general?"

"Improving, I'm glad to say. There was a celebration when I was there, to coincided with the Spring Festival. Father was very pleased because the villagers finally managed, after ten years, to save enough to acquire a second-hand diesel generator. They now have power to pump water to the terraces and to enjoy an electric light or two in their homes. They feel immensely proud."

Cheng Ching paused and grew pensive. "Nevertheless, I sometimes feel bad when I go home. Seeing Father on crutches reminds me I had promised to return to Thirsty Hills after Korea, to help him and Mother around the village and to train another family dog. My father has aged a lot but never says anything about my promise. That makes me feel even more guilty."

"Life often does not offer a man a choice. Your father's a true patriot! Always steadfast. I'm sure he understands the Party requires your talents. I haven't seen him for close to forty years. Have been meaning to visit, but never found time. Still remember him as he was on the day we stormed Luting Bridge. What a day! Victory or death! We're greybeards now. Perhaps it's better to live on memories, to remember each other as we then were. We probably wouldn't recognize each other should we meet. Come, let's stroll in the garden a while."

The General led the way out, walking stiffly.

The air in the garden was sweet with the smell of damp spring earth. A full moon had risen in the black, cloudless sky. Cheng Ching offered his arm and the General took it. As the pair strolled along the crooked walks, it struck Cheng Ching that the leaves of the pines and cypresses, licked by moonlight, had taken on an unnatural sheen. He had a premonition that something else was about to illuminate itself.

After a dozen yards, General Yeh whispered: "Not safe to talk indoors. Harder for eavesdroppers out here."

"Somebody's been eavesdropping on you!"

“Can’t be sure. No harm in being careful. Someone recently tried to bug the private railway carriage of Chairman Mao.”

“Really! Who would dare do such a thing?”

“Obviously some group playing for very high stakes. Haven’t been able to find out so far. This damnable Cultural Revolution has turned the country upside down. The air is poisonous with intrigues. Everybody’s jockeying for power, spying on everybody else. Your father hasn’t been troubled by Red Guards, has he?”

“Thirsty Hills’s too small and remote for anyone to bother.”

“That’s a blessing! Your father always had foresight, hiding himself in a place like that, away from all the scheming and back-biting. If we had more cadres like him, this country wouldn’t be in the mess it’s in. That wife of the Chairman’s and her coterie are bringing ruin to the country. They must be stopped.”

Cheng Ching’s heart skipped a beat. People had lost their lives for saying less. His adoptive father had been closely associated with General Peng Te-huai and both his father and himself were closely connected with General Yeh. Chairman Mao did not always distinguish between guilt and innocence when rooting out opponents and conspirators. Cheng Ching suddenly grew fearful for the safety of his parents.

As if reading the younger man’s thoughts, General Yeh murmured: “General Peng was the most upright man in the Politburo. You don’t know him as I do. He thought only of the good of the country. It had been a real honour to serve under him. How can a man be declared an ‘anti-Party’ plotter and thrown into prison for speaking the truth? He’s sick and they’re denying him medicine. That’s not right. I can’t stand idly by!”

“What are you thinking?” Cheng Ching asked. The hairs on the back of his neck itched with alarm.

General Yeh tightened his grip on Cheng Ching’s arm. “Ah Ching, I’ve put you on the spot. Forgive me. Your father and I have risked our lives many times for the dreams we’ve believed in. You’ve risked yours too. If a man can no longer live honourably, then it’s time to die honourably. I can’t bear to see the progress so many have paid so dearly for turn to dust in the clutches of rascals and vultures. Our country is spinning into chaos. We must stop it. Will you join me?”

Cheng Ching shivered involuntarily. It was as if he were back in the frozen trenches of Korea. Whatever he decided, lives would be at stake. Not only the General’s and his own but also those of his parents. There would be bloodbaths and he might have to kill again, in the name of patriotism or duty or Party unity. Had he the stomach for it after so many years of pushing paper in secret offices? He fingered the scar on his right cheek.

“If you’re concerned, it’s best you denounce me while there’s still time,” General Yeh continued. “Our families are too closely linked. If you won’t join me, you’ll have to distance yourself, for the sake of your family.”

“Erh Fu, I could never denounce you! You and my father were close comrades in arms. You were one of my commanding officers in Korea and have now adopted me as a son. How

can I do anything but side with you, come what may? I haven't been blind during my time in the General Office. I've seen the rot setting in. There was a time, wasn't there, when the revolution really gave the nation hope? We served the common people. We got rid of many of the old evils. Everybody became so honest no one needed to lock their homes at night. All that is now being lost."

The General nodded. His angular features tightened with bitterness. "During the darkest days in our history, under the most despotic emperors, we still had a Censorate to criticise bad policies and give voice to the dissatisfactions of the people. Now we've developed a new class of professional slaves under a feudal-fascist dictatorship, with everyone living in fear."

"That's the Chairman's doing!" Cheng Ching said, vehemently. "I've waited for other leaders to step in after Chairman Liu but no one did. Chairman Liu's death in disgrace is also our disgrace."

"Too many at the top have kept silent. They trembled as they watched old comrades destroyed. The young, the conscience of our Party and the hope of our country, were executed too. Have you heard of a woman Party member named Chang Chi-hsin, who served in Shenyang in Liaoning Province?"

"Yes, I came across her dossier in the General Office. She was what every upright Communist ought to be. She defend the reputations of General Peng and Chairman Liu on the facts of their cases. But they arrested her. In spite of legal assessors twice finding her without guilt in any crime, she was sentenced to an indefinite term of imprisonment."

"She's been inside since 1970 and repeatedly tortured. Yet she's remained defiant, claiming she was only exercising her right of free speech as a Party member. She argued that if Party members could not speak freely, then who could? There's been a number of public protests in Liaoning in her support, but no one seems to have the courage to set her free. It's a shameful case, a national disgrace! You know who's in charge of Liaoning, don't you?"

"The Chairman's nephew."

"My sources tell me he'll have her executed as a warning to others who defy him."

"That's appalling!"

"I'm afraid so. Unfortunately, I'm helpless to do anything. That is why we must end this chaos as soon as possible."

The two men strolled for a while in silence.

"Erh Fu, I don't think I've ever told you how Chairman Mao came to be my benefactor. By uttering a few words he opened the way for me in the Party. I gained admission to the provincial and national Party colleges and rose in the Party like a meteor, some said. Everybody thought I had been handpicked. Within the General Office I'm still perceived as being unquestioningly loyal to the Chairman. I'm deferred to for that reason. Yet I've spoken with him only once in my life. Isn't that laughable?"

"That's good," the General said. "A Maoist reputation is an asset these days. You'll be more useful for that."

“Actually, I’ve come to loathe him even as I read his instructions and relay his directives. What have the dead of the Long March died for? Or those who had thrown their lives away in Korea? What of the millions killed during the rectification campaigns? How many more people must die before our leaders come to their senses? Seeing Nixon in the heart of Peking was an abomination. Seeing him embraced by the Chairman was the last straw. That made a mockery of all our principles.”

Cheng Ching’s outburst took him back momentarily to the fighting trenches of Korea, to the night patrols with Old Tung, Mad Fan, Koo, Lai and the rest of them. They had laid down their lives. For what? For a vision which the survivors were honour-bound to deliver. Ying too had sacrificed herself for that same vision. He had manufactured a pretext to study her Party dossier. She was married now, to some junior cadre in a backwater in Kansu. She has a son and was still working as a nurse. What a waste! He heart ached over what might have been.

He had failed them all, he bitterly rebuked himself. He had settled for being a paper-pusher in the General Office. All at once he wanted to be rid of his guilt, his years of complicity, his cowardly servitude. He looked at the moon. It seemed to shine as brightly as a clear conscience. “I’m with you,” he declared.

“Good,” General Yeh said. “But don’t be too hard on the Chairman. Don’t forget his policies had been endorsed by the Politburo and the Party. Politburo members might occasionally suffer from a loss of nerve but no one can question the legitimacy of Party decisions. The Chairman has grown old and fallen prey to manipulators. If he had died fifteen years ago, he would have gone down as one of the greatest Chinese leaders. As it is, his reputation and achievements are being tarnished.”

“It would have been better if he had died in 1954.”

“1954? Why ’54?”

“That was the year I met him. I stood before him then, and I was filled with wonder. It was a golden moment. He seemed like a hero, a god, full of charm and kindness. I would have given my life for him if he had asked. Though he extended me a helping hand, he also exploited a girl I loved to satisfy his own lust. When he tired of her he married her off to some lowly cadre. I did not discover till long after I had joined the General Office what a womanizer the Chairman was. I can never forgive him.”

“Set personal feelings aside. There’s much to do. I want you to keep your eyes and ears open in the General Office. Identify those who might be sympathetic to our cause. But make no contact. Just let me have the names and I’ll arrange the rest. Be careful. I’m not yet sure where the sympathies of your Director lie. Don’t forget he used to be the Chairman’s bodyguard and is still a big player in the Cultural Revolution. I also want you to study all the files and dossiers on Hong Kong you can lay your hands on. If we are successful, chances are you’ll have to go there.”

“Hong Kong? What can I do in that den of corruption?”

“Where, except in a den of corruption, can unobtainable things be obtained? The military has been starved of modern weaponry. It has been seriously demoralized by the Lin Piao affair and the arrest of a number of its senior officers. We have to keep the Liberation Army on

side. The Chairman's concepts of warfare are outmoded. He hadn't seen at first hand what happened in Korea nor learnt the lessons of our conflict with India. He still thinks wars can be won by raw human courage. That plays into the hands of our enemies."

Cheng Ching nodded in agreement to the General's analysis.

"Since Korea, the West has cut us off from high technology. Even telecommunication products and computers are embargoed, let alone nuclear and space technology. The excuse is that we're harbouring aggressive intentions when it is the Americans and the British who have bases all over the world! We must get better equipment to protect our country. That means buying or stealing whatever we can. Gyroscopes, tracking radar, mainframe computers, guidance systems, production equipment for liquid-fuel missile engines, manuals, maintenance reports, malfunction investigations, everything."

"The Americans'll kick up a fuss once they find out," Cheng Ching said. "They're screaming enough already about infringements of copyright and breaches of intellectual property laws."

"Americans! What gall! When they were establishing their country they were the most unscrupulous stealers of other people's land and ideas. Now they talk of protecting intellectual property. Bah! The fruits of the human intellect should be enjoyed by all. We invented paper, matches, printing, gunpowder, the magnetic compass, the seismograph, the decarburization of cast iron, the making of silk.

"Who has ever paid us a single fen for their use? Even now others want to learn about herbal medicine and acupuncture from us. We do not charge them. I feel no qualm over taking what we need from the Americans. The trick is not to create waves. Or at least waves too obviously made by us. It's not for nothing that the Americans keep in Hong Kong their largest consulate in the world."

"Haven't we been getting what we want out of Hong Kong?"

"We have. But not enough. The man there at the moment doesn't carry sufficient clout within the Party. Also not smart enough to handle the Americans and his local colleagues. The jockeying for position in Hong Kong is every bit as complex as it is here. You've got the Party's Central-South Regional organization to contend with. Then there are the ministries for foreign, financial and economic affairs. Add in the Bank of China, various provincial hierarchies and the local Work Committee and the whole thing's a mess. Not sure whom to trust. Security becomes a headache. The putative local head, the Director of the New China News Agency, has mixed loyalties and is beholden to too many people. He's simply past his prime."

"I may not be able to do any better than the person there at the moment. I know nothing about Hong Kong."

"But you're much smarter than he is. Besides, you know the inner workings of the Party and enjoy a much higher standing. You'll be able to cut through the jurisdictional squabbles. I want to deal with somebody I can rely on. Your knowledge of English will also be an advantage. You can deal directly, without an interpreter, eliminating a potential source for leaks. I can place

handpicked operatives at your disposal, as many as you want, both in Hong Kong and across the border in Kwangtung. They're highly trained and will execute orders without question.

"But we need to resolve problems here first. Bide our time. When power changes hands, it must be seen as smooth and bloodless. Old Ironsides, Commander of the Southern Military Region, is with us. When it's time for you to head south, I'll fix up the contact. You can go to him if you encounter local difficulties you can't handle."

"I understand," Cheng Ching said. "I'll be ready when you need me."

"Good. Now let's go in and see what's for dinner."