

## Coup and Countercoup

### **Peking, October 1976:**

On September 9, 1976, Chairman Mao died.

For months the great and infallible leader of the Chinese Communist revolution had pondered his fate. Ten years before, he had presided over eight rallies at Tienanmen Square, each involving well over a million of his ecstatic Red Guards. The sunlight on his face, the shouted adulations, the roar of young voices swearing oaths of allegiance, had all been so intoxicating! They were his instruments, to use as he directed. With them, he could smash everything that had gone before and shape a new and more glorious China.

That had been his lifelong dream, a Communist utopia on a scale never attempted before. Ah, what a vision! No one, living or dead, could hold a candle to him when it came to such dreams. He alone was masterful enough, brave enough, determined enough, to brush aside sentimentality and the inhibitions for the past. China had to be driven to greatness through sheer human will, through the dumping of old thoughts, old culture, old customs and old habits. It had to leapfrog the whole capitalist stage in human development set out in Marxist theory to go from a semi-feudal society straight into a full-blown socialist one. National transvaluation. A new, dynamic society of Nietzschean “supermen”. The price might be high but well worth paying. He had already sacrificed eight members of his family, including his first wife, to bring the revolution thus far. Had he not told Nehru he was prepared to see half the world’s population perish in a nuclear holocaust if that could ensure the triumph of his brand of Communism?

Things had not gone exactly according to plan, however. His Red Guards had fire enough in their bellies and strength enough in their sinews. Within two years they had wrought unimaginable destruction to old institutions and caused the deaths of half a million diehards. Yet the new order failed to materialize. Why? It could not be due to any defect in his conception. It could only be due to the bunglings of his disciples. Or perhaps to the stubbornness of old teachings and the sabotage of old unreliaables like Chou En-lai.

Chou had never been a true revolutionary. Too diplomatic and too squeamish. He had allowed Chou to remain Premier because they had been through much together. But with every passing year it became more obvious that Chou could never amount to anything more than a nit-picking mandarin-administrator of the traditional mould. Chou had betrayed him, just like all the others, watering down the purity of his ideas. Well, Chou was gone now. Died in January. But so had the glory days of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. They would never come back and he was too old to shake the world again.

What was as wrenching as that missed opportunity was the spontaneous outpouring of grief for Chou at the last Ching Ming Festival. Ordinary people flocked without official sanction in their thousands to Tienanmen Square, with their pathetic wreaths, silly poems and white silk

flowers. Such obscene displays of emotion! It made him sick. Hurtful too. Nothing similar would mark his own passing. All he could look forward to was some bloodless state-sponsored ritual.

He felt cheated. He was a greater man than Chou, greater than all of them. He deserved his rightful place in history and in the collective consciousness of his people. But his standing had been eroded by the calumnies of enemies and the incompetence of his disciples. His wife and her hangers-on had been pathetic. Pity he had to rely on them. If they had done their jobs properly, no ungrateful peasant would have ever declared at the mourning for Chou that the dead Premier had placed a bowl of rice upon his table whereas Mao, the Great Helmsman of the nation, had only showed him beautiful paintings of banquets and feasts!

Perhaps the world was not yet ready for a seer of his calibre. To be surrounded by mediocrities was a tragedy. They were already squabbling over his mantle. What contemptible creatures! All talk and no delivery, occupying the toilet only to fart.

Well, if his people's vision of heaven extended no more than that of toads at the bottom of a well, if they cared only for paltry bowls of rice, then he would deliver them to Hua Kuo-feng.

Hua was as safe and unexciting a pair of hands as could be found anywhere. Hua could deliver rice to be sure. Anointing him would be terribly pedestrian, however. The man had no charisma, no outward grace, just a great bulk with a shambling walk. No "superman" in the making there. Acquitted himself well enough though, running Hunan Province, and had not stepped out of line following a promotion to the Politburo in 1973. Had not done too badly either during his stint as Minister of Public Security. Deficiencies in experience were counterbalanced by an honest and thoughtful temperament. Hua should have enough good sense not to be over-awed by the Shanghai gang. That lot had had their opportunity and had made a mess of it. Now they would have to take their chances. Whether Hua himself would survive in the end was something else again.

Thus Cheng Ching imagined how Chairman Mao, racked by chronic constipation and failing health, might have reflected during his final few weeks. He engaged in such speculations to relieve the tension of waiting. With the death of the Chairman, the long bickerings and manoeuvrings were coming to a head. Ideologues pitted against pragmatists, nationalists against internationalists, idealists against opportunists, conservatives against modernizers, radicals against revisionists, mortals against would-be supermen.

Cheng Ching was only a pawn in a complicated political game, a game with neither rules nor a clear knowledge of other participants. That ignorance left him on edge. Yet, in a sense, he was glad. His fate had been consigned to the hands of others, absolving him from the horse-trading and shady dealings that had to be part of the contest. He would be no good at that. Perhaps he was not even good at being a Communist. Reconciling ends and means had always been troublesome for him.

Recently he had called on his adoptive father only to impart important information or to respond to a summons. He knew how preoccupied the General must be, so he contented himself with drawing inferences from developments gleaned through the General Office.

The eulogy delivered by Hua Kuo-feng on September 18 at the commemoration of the Chairman's death had at first left him on tenterhooks. Hua had taken pains to warn against plotting. But to whom was that warning directed and in whose direction might Hua be leaning? Hua's support was crucial. If the remarks were directed against his adoptive father and his group, then the situation was grim. Both of them might be rounded up at any moment.

The General had instructed him to keep a close eye on Director Wang. Wang's support was crucial too because he controlled Unit 8341 guarding the Chung Nan Hai complex. Wang had been closely identified with the Cultural Revolution but the General said he had a hold over the burly Director and was trying to bring him on board.

After a week of taut nerves, Director Wang personally brought Cheng Ching some secret Party files and suggested he might care to study them. Cheng Ching knew then the support of the Director had been secured. Because the Director had worked closely with Hua when the latter was Minister of Public Security, the auguries were good that Hua might be enlisted as well.

This was more or less confirmed on October 4, when Party organs controlled by Mao's widow and her Shanghai group printed an article attacking Hua as a rightist. The attack suggested two possibilities -- either the Shanghai group judged themselves strong enough to win power or they were trying to create chaos as the prelude to a coup.

From that time onwards, Cheng Ching went around as if some capricious alarm clock had been installed inside his brain. Every thought, rumour, clue, conjecture or fact could set it jangling. It would go off when he detected a slightly tighter cast to Director Wang's mouth or when he realized that half of the three hundred odd members of the Central Committee had risen to power during the Cultural Revolution. Such alarms would continue as he calculated the divisions among the twenty-five members of the Politburo and who had something to gain or lose by an alteration in the power structure.

His imaginary alarm clock was ringing overtime when Hua called an emergency meeting of the Politburo for the evening of October 5. As a member of the General Office, he was deeply involved in the preparations. The meeting could determine once and for all how power might be devolved.

A palpable air of tension developed in the General Office. Everybody knew matters were coming to a head. Senior cadres eyed one another, unsure where individual loyalties lay or how a realignment of power might affect each of them.

Discussions within the Politburo proved heated. Mao's widow attempted to use forged documents to prove that Chairman Mao had preferred her as his successor. She suggested that Hua should accordingly propose her as the new Chairman of the Party. Hua declined. The meeting broke up without a decision. It was agreed, however, that another meeting would be convened to resolve the issue.

The delay was torture for Cheng Ching. He struggled to concentrate on his work, as his internal alarm kept going off. Then Director Wang sent for him.

“I need you for a mission tonight,” Director Wang said. “I want you to stay in the office till dinner time.”

Cheng Ching nodded. His heart pounded as he made his way back to his own office. What could the mission be? To convey secret messages or to duplicate secret documents? Perhaps to doctor Party files to disprove the claims of the Chairman’s widow? Or had the Director switched allegiance again and the request was nothing but a ploy to arrest him after others had gone? Should he alert his adoptive father? Or would he be adding to the General’s worries by scare-mongering?

Then, when dinner time approached, Director Wang sent for him again. “I want you to go to the homes of Comrades Wang Hung-wen and Chang Chun-chiao,” he said. “Tell them Comrade Hua wants an emergency meeting of the Standing Committee of the Politburo at 8.00 p.m., in the No.2 Conference Room in the Huaiwen Hall in Chung Nan Hai. It is to decide on whether a plenum of the Central Committee ought to be called.

“You’re known to them both as a senior cadre in the General Office. Not unusual for urgent and confidential messages to be conveyed this way. They’ll have no cause to question what you say. Nor is there a need for you to answer questions or say anything else. Just act naturally.”

“Yes,” Cheng Ching said. But the message did not seem to make sense. The deaths of Chairman Mao, Premier Chau and Marshal Chu Teh had reduced the Standing Committee to just four members. Wang and Chang were leaders in the Shanghai faction. The remaining two members were Premier Hua and Marshal Yeh, a namesake of his adoptive father’s. The Standing Committee would not be able to decide anything. At best a two-two split -- unless someone had already sealed an underhanded deal.

Those calculations alarmed Cheng Ching again. “The Standing Committee’ll have its job cut out,” he remarked.

Director Wang scratched the side of his big, red nose and replied. “After you’ve delivered the messages, come back to the General Office. I shall be gone by then. Stay put and shortly after eight you should be receiving a telephone call. The caller will say: ‘I can have supper with you tonight because my headache has gone and my stomach upset is better.’ Or he will say he can’t and give a variation of that statement, such as his headache being better but not the stomach upset. If there’s a variation, remember the precise wording. In either event, telephone General Yeh at once and convey the message word for word. He’ll know what’s required.”

He returned to the General Office and waited. At precisely five minutes past eight the telephone rang. The pre-determined words came over the line without alteration. He felt buoyed up and happy as he passed the news to General Yeh.

It appeared Wang and Chang had been arrested without fuss at the Huaiwen Hall. It was over in less than two minutes.

But what of the other leaders of the Shanghai gang? Anxious as he was, he could not ask over the telephone. He curbed his curiosity and set off home on his bicycle, pedaling down the

Avenue of Eternal Peace. When he came to the portrait of Chairman Mao beaming down from Tienanmen, he felt renewed hope for the future of his country.

Cheng Ching learnt subsequently of the fate of Mao's widow from secret reports. She must have had a presentiment of disaster for she had been changing her place of sleep every night. It was the duty of Unit 8341 to know where she was at all times, however, so it was easy for Director Wang's special squad to pick her up at a residence near the Temple of the White Pagoda. She yelled and screamed and rolled on the floor when arrested. When her female attendants realized what was taking place, they cursed her, spat on her and told her she deserved her fate. They accused her of watching pornographic Western films and reading decadent foreign magazines in the privacy of her home.

How undignified, Cheng Ching thought, when he read the reports. How unlike Chang Chi-hsin, the woman cadre shot in Liaoning the previous year. Chang Chi-hsin had demanded justice for General Peng and Chairman Liu Shao-chi and had paid with her life. Chairman Mao's nephew had ordered her vocal cords to be severed to prevent her shouting defiance while being led to the public execution ground. But she had remained uncowed to the end. How magnificently she had behaved compared with Chairman Mao's scheming wife!

Yao Wen-yuan, the fourth leader in the Gang of Four, was arrested at his home the same evening. During that night and the following day, thirty close associates of the Gang were taken into custody. They included the Minister of Culture and Mao's nephew, who was wounded in an exchange of gunfire with arresting officers.

The news of the Gang's downfall was greeted with jubilation throughout the country. Once the initial euphoria was over, however, Cheng Ching felt ambivalent. The leaders of the Gang of Four were under lock and key. General Yeh and his supporters had won the day. But oppressors and criminals still sat in the Politburo and corrupt careerists retained power in the administration. That spelt uncertainty. Scepticism and fear still pervaded Peking.

Something else troubled Cheng Ching. How could the fate of a thousand million people be determined by back-room deals stitched together by a handful of men? When would the democratic processes and the rule of law foreseen by Marx come into being?

There were also the pressing problems of poverty and hunger and social collapse. He remembered his father telling him of the abject poverty and sufferings of people he had encountered during the Long March. In Kweichow he had found people dressed only in loincloths, living in huts made of mud and lath. Their chief food was corn and bits of cabbage. The infant mortality rate was fifty per cent and life expectancy thirty years.

Half a century later, Cheng Ching discovered from reports in the General Office that the situation in some areas had remained largely unaltered. The only positive thing the Cultural Revolution had brought was to send millions of city youths into remote regions to taste the harsh realities of country life.

When he met General Yeh for dinner some days later, he gave voice to some of his reservations.

“Yes, we’ve wasted twenty-five years,” the General said. “Be patient. The Great Wall wasn’t built in a day. Problems have to be tackled systematically, one at a time. The political struggle crucial to everything else is not yet over. There are many factions. The Gang of Four is but one. Some who are our allies now can become our enemies tomorrow. We must proceed cautiously and remain on guard. A revolution within a revolution takes a very long time. Simply weeding out undesirables from the General Office will be no easy matter.”

“People are dying of hunger. When will they be fed? There have been vast injustices. When will sufferers have their names cleared? And what of the thousands who have forfeited their lives simply for speaking the truth?”

“Be patient! Be patient! Food will be produced. Criminals will be punished. Those who have been wronged will be rehabilitated. That I promise you. But some things take time. Certainly much longer than I have. That’s why people like you must continue with those tasks.”

Cheng Ching felt depressed by the inconclusiveness of the coup. It had been two and a half years since his adoptive father broached the subject of toppling the Maoists. That period since had been the most stressful period of his life. Worse than Korea. In Korea at least one knew who the enemies were. Here there were only shadows, intrigues and shifting alliances. Small wonder his father hid himself away in a godforsaken village.

He wished he could re-join his family. An uneventful life seemed suddenly attractive beyond words. He had done enough for his country and the Party. It was time to honour the promise made more than twenty-four years ago. He would speak to his adoptive father at the first opportunity.

Before he could do so, however, a letter came from Thirsty Hills on October 29 to report the passing of his father.