

The Work Committee

Hong Kong, July 1978:

It was close to dinner time when Cheng Ching left his sanctum on the thirteenth floor. On the twelfth floor he picked up a bodyguard as he entered the lift. Another late meal, he thought, as he emerged from the lift. A car was waiting to speed him and his escort to a meeting of the Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee.

Cheng Ching inwardly cursed the British as he sank into the rear seat of the car. Hong Kong was Chinese territory. Its existence depended on China's goodwill. Yet the Chinese Communist Party was being forced to operate under false colours and to use a ridiculous alias, simply because the British had proscribed the Party under their Societies Ordinance back in 1949. They would pay for that arrogance one day.

Unfortunately, the time was not yet opportune. Too many things remained unsettled in China. General Yeh had indicated on the red telephone that morning that the new power structure still had to be stabilized. Hua Kuo-feng, Mao's successor, was under pressure from both leftists and rightists. The vast oil painting, hanging in the marbled foyer of Peking's main railway station, depicting Hua receiving his mandate from Mao, might soon have to be removed. How slippery was the grasp on power!

Cheng Ching reconciled himself to the tedium of secret meetings of the Work Committee held at ever-changing venues. The selected spot that evening was the office of an obscure trade union on the second floor of a crumbling tenement. Its location, in a narrow side street off Southorn Playground, was equally obscure.

As the car neared its destination, he marvelled at the teeming life in that rundown neighbourhood. It was a good location for a meeting. Any foreigner would become immediately conspicuous.

The car stopped at the mouth of the street, next to a shop selling herbal brews. Cheng Ching picked out two men in Hawaiian shirts at a table. They had glasses of some brown concoction and a radio phone in front of them and unnatural bulges beneath their shirts. The moment he alighted one of them picked up the phone.

Cheng Ching followed the bodyguard on the short walk to the appointed building. The ground floor was occupied by an ironmonger's shop. The shop next door sold joss sticks and paper replicas of mansions, gold bullion, limousines and gorgeous gowns to be burnt as offerings to relatives in the afterlife. Both shops were shuttered, although lights within suggested continuing activity.

Sandwiched between the two shops was a narrow flight of creaky stairs. A sign over the entrance indicated the stairs led to the office of the Amalgamated Union of Metal Workers. A young man in a Hawaiian shirt and a pair of dirty jeans loitered at the foot of the stairs. On the pavement outside the ironmonger's shop, two men who looked like coolies were playing Chinese chess under a street lamp. Several onlookers clustered around them.

The young man at the bottom of the stairs immediately stood aside for Cheng Ching to pass. Not a single word was exchanged. The bodyguard joined the spectators around the chess game.

Cheng Ching found eight men with sallow and impassive faces inside the room, including the Director of the Hong Kong branch of the New China News Agency. The Director was the de facto representative of the Chinese Government in Hong Kong and was formally the chairman of the Work Committee.

The situation was ludicrous, Cheng Ching thought. It had arisen because of British refusal to countenance the establishment of a formal diplomatic mission in the colony. Another slight to be settled.

Cheng Ching had noted from the dossiers in the General Office that the Director was an old revolutionary, already past his prime. The post had been awarded as a sinecure prior to retirement.

The men were seated on cheap, metal folding chairs arranged around three battered but sturdy mah jong tables placed end to end. Each had in front of him some documents and a cup of tea. Teapots stood on the tables for replenishments. Three or four aluminium ashtrays were filled with cigarette butts.

Fluorescent tubes emitted a dingy, bilious light. The room was dominated by a large photograph of Chairman Mao. Yellowing Venetian blinds had been lowered, cutting out any vagrant breeze. Two electric fans stirred the smoke-tainted air. It occurred to Cheng Ching the setting was probably not dissimilar to that used by the founders of the Party in Shanghai decades before.

Although the appointed hour had not yet been reached, Cheng Ching nevertheless apologized as a matter of courtesy because he was the last to arrive. His brooding presence at the previous two meetings and the scar of battle on his cheek left little doubt where real power lay.

He studied the sombre men gathered around the makeshift conference table. Except for the Director, he did not know them well. They seemed joyless and etiolated, as if all the gayer hues of life had been drained away. How different they were to General Yeh, Old Tung, Mad Fan and his own father.

They lacked passion, Cheng Ching thought. They had become, like his erstwhile colleagues in the General Office, time-servers and paper-pushers, set in their ways and slaves to the prevailing Party line. The keen edge of daring had probably been blunted by the dizzying material abundance in Hong Kong. No doubt some were already surreptitiously trading in stocks and shares and making provision for their children's education overseas.

They had ceased to be revolutionaries. Agendas, discussion papers and minutes cushioned them as they did corporate executives. It was a security nightmare. Small wonder the British Special Branch and MI-5 so often obtained details of matters discussed. Perhaps Chairman Mao had a point when he spoke of the need for perpetual revolution. How could such passionless men be entrusted with noble assignments?

“We seem to be all here. Shall we begin?” the Director asked genially, after someone had poured Cheng Ching a cup of tea. The Director’s voice sounded hoarse from too many cigarettes.

There was a quick shuffling of papers followed by general assent. People delivered reports on hardy perennials -- poor recruitment among left-wing trade unions; fluctuations in hard currency remittances; recent united front efforts; gains or losses in market share for Chinese foodstuffs, cement and steel; and intelligence about Kuomintang activities.

Cheng Ching half-listened. He was more interested in assessing the speakers than hearing what they had to say. He knew from their dossiers they had all been activists in bygone struggles. Most held pedestrian jobs to disguise their clandestine lives. Two had served with the East River guerrillas during the Japanese occupation. One of them had done time in a British prison following the spill-over of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

Collectively, the men around the table could exercise more power than the British colonial government. On a command from Peking, they could make hot money turn tail, investment capital dry up, banks suffer runs and the local currency to collapse. They could arrange for lives to be snuffed out and whole families to disappear. But, placed in charge of the city, none would know how to keep the wealth pouring out so magically.

Cheng Ching’s ruminations were interrupted by a high-pitched, rather womanish voice. It was Comrade Tang, a plump, engaging man in middle age. His cover was that of a solicitor’s clerk.

He talked long-windedly about the system for securing embargoed machinery for the Khmer Rouge, ordering consignments in the names of local sympathizers and paying for them through China Resources, a Chinese state company registered under the local Companies Ordinance. He anticipated problems might arise if the Registrar of Companies started examining the records of China Resources.

As discussions proceeded on how best to overcome the problem, a voice suddenly demanded: “Why should we help the Khmer Rouge at all? They’ve been killing our compatriots in Cambodia.” It was Comrade Fu, a lean man with a sharp, narrow face, resembling a ferret’s. He was in charge of cultural and educational affairs.

Cheng Ching remembered that Fu had hardly spoken during the last two meetings. It was as if he had been lying in wait. He recalled from the dossiers that Fu had once been a leading light in the All-Circles Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee, set up during the 1967 confrontation. He had served a two-year sentence in Stanley Prison for injuring a police officer during a riot.

“There are larger issues at stake, Comrade Fu,” the Director said. “There is much confusion in Cambodia. Lots of people are being killed. A revolution is not a tea party.”

“Reports say the Khmer Rouge have massacred at least 100,000 Chinese during the last twelve months,” Comrade Fu continued. “We should not be strengthening them. Attempts to achieve racial purity through massacres are contrary to Marxist principles.”

“We can always count on Comrade Fu to offer us a fresh perspective on everyday problems,” the Director said. “The Khmer Rouge are not just killing Chinese. They’re killing their

own people as well, not to mention the Islamic Chams and other minority tribes. But we have to deal with the Khmer Rouge because an enemy of an enemy is a friend.”

“Comrade Fu has a point,” Cheng Ching interposed, pleased to discover a comrade with fire in his belly. “Principles are important. Comrade Fu has proved his commitment to the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle. His hunger strike in prison in support of a demand for the right to have the complete works of Chairman Mao available has been hailed in the People’s Daily. He has rightfully emerged a hero.

“Our leadership, however, distinguishes between relationships involving states and those involving fraternal parties. These are again divided between those dealt with centrally and those left to local initiatives. In the case of machinery for Cambodia, that’s a relationship for Peking to handle, since Cambodia ships tropical products directly to China in payment.”

“Comrade Cheng has summarized the position well,” the Director said, with alacrity. “I think we can leave it there.”

“What about guns and ammunition in the vaults of the Bank of China?” Comrade Fu persisted. “That’s a local matter.”

The Director’s jaw dropped. Others made a pretence of studying their papers or sipping their tea.

Cheng Ching glanced around the table but most avoided his eyes. The Director was bent over lighting a cigarette. Fu was obviously someone reckless enough to pursue awkward subjects, Cheng Ching noted. He wondered if the man could be bent to serve his secret purposes. “Well, what about the arms?” he asked.

“State banks have more branches now,” Comrade Fu said. “Shouldn’t arms be more widely dispersed? In 1967 the People’s Daily called upon the people to mount a courageous struggle to smash British rule. We went into the streets but we were not supplied with guns. We used home-made bombs. The struggle was a failure because some elements in the Party were too cautious, too faint-hearted, too fearful of the consequences. We could have taken this city, if we had weapons.”

“Well, what can we learn from the lessons of history?” Cheng Ching asked, as soothingly as he could. “Urban uprisings were a favourite with comrades in the Comintern, but they invariably failed in China and wasted many lives. Chairman Mao corrected that erroneous line. He reminded us that, being a land of peasants, uprisings had to be peasant-based. That insight eventually led the Party to victory.

“In the case of Hong Kong the line was set down by Comrade Chou En-lai decades ago. The British presence is a problem left over by history, to be addressed when the time is ripe. Though Comrade Chou has since gone to meet Marx, that position remains unaltered. The situation here is not favourable for armed struggle. We must not overreach ourselves, though it is correct not to allow socialist principles to be watered down by material considerations.”

“Yes, we must concentrate on the Four Modernizations,” the Director chipped in. “In a very short time, this city should fall to us like a ripe plum.”

“But a poisonous one,” Comrade Fu retorted. “This place is a breeding ground for reactionary prejudices and bourgeois corruptions. People are behaving more like petty capitalists with every passing day. It proved very difficult removing bourgeois influences from Shanghai after Liberation. Hong Kong will be much worse. We must lance the canker. We must not surrender to the black winds of economism. Though foreign earnings may appear as attractive as sets of cavity-free teeth, we must not allow them to subvert principles. Why keep arms if we never intend to use them?”

“Another problem left over by history,” the Director said. “Our primary mission at present is to generate foreign earnings for the Motherland to modernize. I was not party to the decision to bring arms here. So far as I understand, the situation then was more fluid than it is now.”

Cheng Ching, sensing that the discussion was drifting, intervened again. “There seem to be three issues. First, there is the historical fact of weapons having been stored in the vaults of the Bank of China. Second, whether weapons should have been distributed in 1967. And third, whether they should be more widely dispersed now. Does that cover it?”

A murmur of agreement arose from around the table.

“Good,” Cheng Ching continued. “What has been done in the past is not a matter that concerns us. As to the non-distribution of weapons in 1967, the roots of those demonstrations must first be examined. Why did they occur? Were they spontaneous local outbreaks or had they been centrally planned? Who initiated them and who was responsible for their direction? Had they been authorized by the Party or had they been instigated by anti-Party adventurers? Why did they fail? Did the issue boil down to the availability or otherwise of weapons? Those are matters currently being investigated by both the Party and the State. We should await their conclusions.

“The third issue goes to the heart of Party policy. It implies a greater likelihood of using weapons, which in turn implies a policy of more robust opposition to British rule. Is there such a policy? The Director feels this place will fall in due time into our hands like a ripe plum. That seems to be the prevailing view. But if there is a significant desire for re-examining the issue, we can always refer the matter upwards.”

Others around the table quickly caught the sense of Cheng Ching’s remarks.

“We should guard against adventurism and deviations to the left,” someone ventured.

“Banks in Hong Kong operate under licences too and are subject to inspection by the Commissioner of Banking,” Comrade Tang’s high-pitched tones took up the argument. “For reasons well understood by all, the Commissioner has desisted from examining certain vaults in the Bank of China. But that cannot be counted on to continue indefinitely. Banks now face growing competition and need more space for safe deposit boxes, customer counters, rooms for investment counselling, and so on. Far from dispersing weapons, we should remove them.”

A murmur of approval went round the table. Comrade Fu, finding himself isolated, retreated into a sullen silence. After the remaining business had been disposed of, Cheng Ching spoke again.

“I wonder if comrades might assist me,” he said. “I find my files woefully inadequate on local personalities. They lack depth. I recently attended a cocktail party given by Chu Wing-seng of the Gold Star group. He is reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in the Far East, decorated by the French and the British. His initiatives in China are well known. He has textile and toy factories in Kwangtung and a hotel in Shanghai and is spearheading a number of new projects elsewhere.

“But what is the extent of our involvement in those activities? Gold Star is an umbrella for many little known companies registered in Liechtenstein, Montserrat and the Turks and Caicos. Some of our state banks have extended facilities to a number of them. The Motherland has been stung by fraudsters in the past. We don’t want state funds lost through lax financing.

“My dossier does not say much about the man or his antecedents. How did his family acquire its wealth? Is Gold Star solid? Chu himself was educated in America but what are his real sympathies? Has he Taiwan or CIA connections? He appears to be a member of many local and international organizations. There’s one known as Phi Beta Kappa, another known as Young Presidents Organization of America. I’ve no idea what they are. Can anyone elucidate?”

There was a general shaking of heads and blank looks around the table.

At last Comrade Sun, an elderly cadre in charge of united front activities, responded. “My section is responsible for cultivating Chu Wing-seng but we haven’t met with much success. Chu’s a bit of a cold fish. He claims his interests lie in business, not politics. I’ve dealt with him when he donated a wing to a university hospital in Canton, to be named after his father. Came up with the money all right. The initial approach was made by a Dr. Chow, a graduate of the university and physician to the Chu family.

“His father, Chu Tung-po, was also a man of some mystery. Came to Hong Kong from Canton before the war to expand the family’s crockery business. Pretty much a nonentity. But by the end of the Pacific War he had amassed vast holdings in land and buildings. That provided the basis for his business empire. No one’s quite sure how he gained so much property. Perhaps he was a collaborator. In any event, he died in an accident at sea a while back.”

“All this should have been in my files,” Cheng Ching said. “It’s obvious more exchange and co-ordination of information is required. Anything else?”

“The elder Chu had been helpful towards the Motherland at one time,” Comrade Sun added. “He shipped in embargoed supplies during the Korean War. Of course, we paid handsomely. His actions were surprising because his father was a staunch supporter of the Kuomintang. The whole family suffered during the rectification campaigns of the 1950s. Not exactly sure what happened. I believe his parents died then. Should be able to find out from the records of the Kwangtung Public Security Bureau. Apart from that, I can add little. Perhaps Comrade Tang knows something more. He works in the office of one of Chu Wing-seng’s solicitors.”

Comrade Tang took over the narrative. “I’m a clerk with Rand and Knight, one of a number of law firms retained by Chu. I haven’t pick up much because the corporate structure of Gold Star is complex. Many firms are involved. I’ll try to see what I can sniff out.

“One thing’s certain, however. Chu is the darling of the garment industry. He found a way around European Economic Community rules governing textiles and quotas. EEC rules provide that any product which changes shape or utility in a particular place can be deemed to have been made there for certificate of origin purposes. Chu came up with the idea of manufacturing individual fronts, backs and sleeves of garments in China, where labour costs are lower, and shipping them to Hong Kong to be stitched together to form whole garments, qualifying them as Hong Kong products. He’s ingenious at finding loopholes. Everyone’s following his example now. People hail him as a wunderkind because of Hong Kong’s lop-sided reliance on textile and garment exports.”

“That illustrates the kind of poison that’s being spread here!” Comrade Fu cried, vehemently. “In a socialist society such actions would be classified as fraud. In this cesspool of capitalism they’re praised and copied. The poison will soon contaminate the Motherland! What will happen to socialist honesty then? The leadership must address such problems, sooner rather than later.”

Silence descended around the table.

After a moment, Cheng Ching said: “Ah, socialist honesty in a cesspool of capitalism! What an intriguing topic for Marxist-Leninist dialectics! As a newcomer, I should like to hear more about it. But such a discussion might be more fitting over a good meal and a large jar of wine. Would you do me that honour after our meeting, Comrade Fu?”

Comrade Fu looked nonplussed for a couple of seconds. “Delighted, Comrade Cheng,” he said, hesitantly, and chuckles of relief broke out among the assembly.

The meeting began to disperse. By convention, the Director was the first to leave. The others followed, one by one or in pairs, at irregular intervals. Cheng Ching and Comrade Fu left together. After that the chess-players under the street lamp and the onlookers also faded away.