

## Reverse Osmosis

### **Hong Kong, May 1980:**

“It’s a lie, a British plot!” The Director’s bushy eyebrows bristled as he spat out the words at an impromptu meeting of the Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee. At the same time he waved a document in the air. “The normal line of communication is between their Political Advisor’s Office and the New China News Agency. There has been no contact, none at all, unless they went directly to Peking or to the Kwangtung authorities. In either case Peking or Canton would certainly have consulted me.”

Cheng Ching allowed others to make the running after providing the report. His concern was to keep discussions focused. “I’ve checked with the Foreign Ministry and the Kwangtung authorities this morning,” he announced. “They’ve had no approach.”

“Then why are we being accused of refusing to supply Hong Kong with more water? Why are they using that to justify this reverse osmosis nonsense?” the Director demanded.

“They aim to turn us into a laughing stock,” Comrade Fu said. “Whether scientifically feasible or not, the people of Hong Kong are not going to drink reconstituted shit! They’ll blame China for bringing this upon them. It’s a British ruse!”

The faces around the oval table displayed varying degrees of agitation.

“We first have to figure out what the British are up to,” Cheng Ching cautioned. “Only then can we decide on a response.”

The document before the meeting was a translation of a British Land Development Policy Committee paper. It had been secured by an undercover agent in the Government Secretariat. It dealt with water supplies. The Committee, made up of senior British civil servants in the Secretariat and top officials in the Public Works Department, had recommended enhancing water supplies through a scientific process known as reverse osmosis. The process was a form of desalination and was reputedly capable of converting even raw sewage into drinking water. Effluent could also be disposed of in an environmentally friendly way. Plants had been constructed and were coming into use in the Middle East.

“Look how they’ve tried to blame us,” the Director said, racing through the arguments in the translation. “Projections of population growth, increasing requirements for water, unreliable pattern of rainfall, limited catchment areas, the lack of suitable land for new reservoirs and the reluctance of China to sell more water. Note the final argument!

“Then the solution on a plate: Reverse osmosis! Technical and town planning experts have conveniently identified a site in Shatin, close to an existing sewage outlet into the sea. Consultants to study cost implications further. What we don’t have are details of the discussions in the Land Development Policy Committee. What arguments led to its proposed recommendation to the Executive Council to engage consultants?”

The Director smoked furiously after highlighting sections of the purloined report. “How can they do this? We’ve been supplying water since 1960 and now this slander, accusing us

of being unco-operative. If we don't act quickly, we could be facing a fait accompli. Very difficult to undo. Peking will blame us for messing things up, ruffling feathers. Even suspect some of us of stirring up trouble out of sympathy for the Gang of Four.

“Why have the British continued with their Cold War mentality? What have they got to fear from us? Isn't it enough they've completed the High Island Reservoir and wasted money on that silly desalination plant at Lok On Pai? Why another expensive scheme when they can easily buy more water from us? Why seek confrontation and unnecessary expense instead of peaceful co-existence?”

“Because they'll be wasting somebody else's money,” someone said. A murmur of assent went around the table.

“The Governor came to our National Day celebrations. When he returned from Peking he told people to put their hearts at ease. I thought that marked the start of a new relationship,” the Director continued. “I had anticipated retiring on a happy note, with the issue of Hong Kong safely left to be settled -- in the wise words of our departed Comrade Chou -- when the time was ripe.

“Now there's this baseless accusation. Do we know how quickly they intend putting the matter before the Executive Council? It can only lead to a row. We must stop it. Better a small row now than a big one later.”

“No indication on timing yet,” Cheng Ching said. He had, after two years, grown accustomed to the Director and other members of the Work Committee digging up past British wrongs to underline their own patriotic credentials. Circumstances had removed them from the cut and thrust of Chinese politics and left them in a place where promoting socialism was akin to a temperance league recruiting members inside a crowded bar.

“The British are two-faced,” Comrade Fu said, screwing up his sharp features in disgust. “They're always cooking up mischief. They've probably got the measure of our troubles. Our coffers are empty, our economy in collapse. We've more than twenty million unemployed. Last year's war with Vietnam didn't help. There are political problems brewing all over the place. Hong Kong's the only bright spot. Earnings here are vital for getting the nation back on its feet. They want to slow us down, make us more pliable. They must be using this reverse osmosis as a lever for some concession. But what? Why pick on water as an excuse, after so many years of co-operation?”

“The British cannot be trusted,” Comrade Sun declared, his lips quivering. “I've had direct family experiences. They were responsible for the deaths of two of my uncles before the last war. They trumped up charges to banish them, because they were Marxists. The moment my uncles crossed the border, they found the Kuomintang waiting. They were arrested, tortured, executed. The Brits had been hand in glove with the Kuomintang all along.

“They keep practising subterfuge and double dealing. We went to the trouble of making extra fuel oil available during the Opec crisis, but they still conspired with the Americans to deny us modern technology. I suspect this latest move is an attempt to squander Hong Kong's

reserves, to benefit British companies and hold back China's recovery. They've long been known as a perfidious race."

So have we, Cheng Cheng thought, as he listened to the animated speculations and the tales disinterred from the bowels of history. The strings to his puppets were becoming tangled. He had to perform upon too vast a stage, to manage too complicated a range of duties.

He had spoken to General Yeh that morning. The political situation in Peking remained unsettled. Following the reversal of the counter-revolutionary verdict on Chang Chi-hsin, the reformers felt strong enough to push through the rehabilitation of Chairman Liu Shao-chi. But horse-trading was still in progress. Director Wang and a number of Politburo members with Maoist sympathies were now under investigation for corruption and other misdeeds.

When he had been in Peking the previous month, his adoptive father told him the British had raised the question of the future of Hong Kong. What fools they were, his adoptive father had declared. If they wanted to run the place, they should have left well enough alone. Perhaps they wanted to pile on the pressure while China was weak. A miscalculation. The Politburo was hardening. There was no possibility of any agreement which reflected poorly on the nation's pride. It was doubtful if anyone would risk a decision of that magnitude until the power structure had stabilized. His adoptive father had instructed that, for security reasons, no whisper of the British probes was to be passed on to cadres in Hong Kong.

Cheng Ching waited for the cross-talking to subside. Then he said: "Just because the British have bested us in the past does not mean we should credit them with more imagination and cunning than they actually possess. This might be a simple case of corruption by an official or officials unknown. Someone might have slipped money under the table. That's not difficult to visualize."

"Let's flush them out then," the cadre in charge of media and public relations said. "The public would be with us if they knew the British planned to make them drink recycled sewage! We can expose the plot in our newspapers and make clear China's willingness to provide all the water required."

Cheng Ching shook his head. "Can't compromise my agent. The Brits'll realize I have a mole."

"We can get Chu Wing-seng to oppose the project in the Executive Council," Comrade Sun said. "He has been relying on us to get projects started in China. He has been seeking permission to bring in teams of Chinese doctors, for study tours and attachments to local hospitals. He's been talking of donating a new organ transplant institute to Canton, in addition to the hospital wing named after his father. Since we've been smoothing the way for him, he should do something for us in return."

"Not just doctors," the Director said. "I've had applications for visits by senior officials from the Public Security Bureau and the prison administration. Don't know what Chu's actually up to. The Canton authorities have been tight-lipped. But, so far as water is concerned, the question must be disposed of publicly, so that everybody knows the true position. Having it killed

in the Executive Council will not do. If there's corruption, let's get some mileage out of it. Show up the British for what they are."

"Comrade Cheng is in charge of intelligence matters," Comrade Fu said. "Can't his people uncover the truth?"

"Not yet," Cheng Ching replied. "I have a suggestion. Let some independent source make the exposure. That would be more credible, making it more difficult for the local administration to brush it off."

"Anyone in mind?" the Director asked.

"The British journalist Baxingdale is a possibility. He has a reputation for not being in anyone's pocket. Leak the document to him. He should be astute enough to pick up the water point and start asking questions."

"Excellent. I second the proposal," Comrade Fu said. "I've had conversations with him. He's fair-minded."

"To play safe, I should speak to Chu nonetheless. We must prepare for contingencies," Comrade Sun added.

"Of course, but make it casual," the Director cautioned. "Chu's an important man, well in with certain quarters in Peking and Kwangtung. Don't want to rub him the wrong way."

The Director, concerned over his own position, decided that he should head a small working group on the issue.

"Comrade Sun, before you speak to Chu, we should have a word. I've some information which might prove useful," Cheng Ching said.

Comrade Sun nodded.

After further discussion about whether Peking should be appraised of the development now or later, the meeting broke up.

Cheng Ching saw the participants off before heading back to his office. Two security guards were still on duty. Both secretaries had gone, however. Though the hour was late, there were things he wanted to mull over. He did not feel hungry. He told one of the guards to arrange meals for themselves and then disappeared into his office.

He turned off the security system for the French windows and went onto the balcony for a breath of air. The night was sultry and the hum of traffic incessant. Lighted windows grimaced at him. Fortune-hunters burning the midnight oil, he thought. No doubt working on ever more ingenious ways of turning shit into lucre! He shook his head and went back inside.

He unlocked the Chubb safe with one of the keys hanging round his neck and extracted a small stack of files. His adoptive father had involved him in a many-sided contest for the control of his country, to rescue it from chaos and injustice. The majority of those associated with his adoptive father now seemed to think capitalist practices were needed to revitalize the country.

The dogmas of the past were being watered down. Intellectuals punished during the Cultural Revolution were being rehabilitated. Properties confiscated from class enemies were being returned. State allocation of jobs had been discontinued. Price controls on a range of commodities

had been lifted. Joint ventures with foreign and overseas Chinese entrepreneurs were being encouraged. All kinds of wheeler-dealers were jumping in with both feet. International carpetbaggers and global-marketeers were arriving by the day, offering export credits, soft loans, bribes, kick-backs. An agreement had already been signed with Japan for the joint exploration for oil in the sea around Diu Yu Toi. "Getting rich through labour" had become a fashionable slogan.

He sensed something deeply wrong. Foreign corporate buccaneers might be producing quicker economic results but at the price of corruption, cynicism and a return of wide disparities in wealth. That type of free-for-all would not be good while the masses remained barely educated.

Something was already happening to himself in that new climate. Things he had done in recent years were weighing upon his conscience. He had helped to trap the leaders of the Gang of Four with fake messages. He had employed bribery and corruption to secure modern arms for his country. He had instructed men to steal, and even to kill, to lay hands on foreign secrets. It was a slippery slope. Now he was about to pass to Comrade Sun information about the private lives of Chu Wing-seng's family members for the purposes of blackmail.

The alibi of a wider national interest was no longer convincing. A memory dislodged from the distant past no longer allowed him to be so easily appeased. He remembered his father pressing upon him the study of the Confucian classics, at a time before such studies became dangerous. Passages setting down the proper conduct for a superior man came back to him. Years of Hegelian dialectics and Mao Tse-tung Thought had not freed him completely from their moral hold.

Hong Kong might be an easy place to lose one's moral balance but was there no depth to which he would not stoop in the name of his cause? Chu Wing-seng was not a particularly likeable person. His latest organ transplant project in Canton reeked with the unsavoury smell of corruption. Some of his business methods were ruthless, exploitative and bordered on sharp practice. But those were not sufficient reasons to use private information about his family against him. The fact that his mother had been an ex-courtesan and his wife an adulteress was nobody's business but their own. If someone had used Ying's willingness to serve as a mistress of Chairman Mao's against her, he would have been outraged. A nation deserving of pride could not be built through such shameful and underhanded methods.

He needed a heart-to-heart talk with his adoptive father the next time he sent for him. His assignment in Hong Kong was troubling him. China was at the crossroads. A wrong turning could spell disaster. His father had taken the path of self-reliance at Thirsty Hills. His mother was continuing that journey. It was painfully slow but morally safe. Perhaps those who lived in poverty and hunger could not afford to wait. Even Chinese patience had its limits. The test for the current leaders must be to find ways of making up for a wasted generation without losing all moral standards. And he needed to hang on to his own.