

A Good Day for Dying

Szechuen has few rivals in China for the sheer splendour of its spring. Its dark green mountains and lush valleys, alive with the colours of rhododendrons, camellias, oleanders and azaleas, challenged the imagination with shifting moods, appearing at times misty and contemplative and at other times resplendent with sunlight. Stately pines, gnarled cypresses and pliant bamboos flourished, together with apples, apricots, bananas, loquats, papayas and sweet cherries. As if that were not enough, almonds, tea bushes and fat juicy tomatoes added to the profusion. The buzz of honeybees and the flutterings of butterflies garnished nature's abundance. It was small wonder ancient bearers of tribute from Tibet, Nepal and other faraway places often assumed Szechuen to be some hidden paradise they had stumbled upon en route to the Chinese capital.

Cheng Yin sat with his back against a camphor tree, taking in the scene. He was a strapping lad, whose steady eyes, resolute mouth and determined jaw insinuated a certain stubbornness of character. The mingled fragrances of fruits and flowers held him and he marvelled at the abundance of orchards, bamboo groves and giant rattan creepers. It was the end of May, yet the air still tingled with the crispness of spring.

He was not knowledgeable about plants and flowers. He could not assign names to the delicate blues, the bashful pinks and the teasing yellows dotting the craggy hills. An intermittant breeze danced fitfully, brushing his lean face as playfully as a flirting woman. He was thankful he was alive on such a day and at such a place. He wanted to store away the pleasure of the moment, for he doubted he would ever come this way again.

No sooner had he admitted that thought, he felt a tingle of shame. He should not take pleasure from the bountifulness of nature. The Communist Party had drummed into him that sentimentality was a habit of the feudal past. It made for weakness. A son of the Revolution could not afford to be weak.

Cheng Yin was dressed in the shapeless uniform of the Red Army, with a cloth cap worn jauntily at the back of his head. His feet sported a pair of worn straw sandals. Like the other twenty-one members of the Second Company of the Fourth Shock Regiment selected for the assault on Luting Bridge, he had a broadsword strapped to his back and a supply of hand grenades attached to his belt. While most of the others were also equipped with tommy guns, he preferred the trusty Mauser by his side, snug in its leather holster.

He and his comrades had arrived less than an hour ago, after marching all night. Their battalion commander had rewarded them with a good meal and most of the others were dozing.

"You should snatch some sleep," the company commander said, as he passed among the men. "We attack at four."

The company commander was called Old Yeh. He had unusually prominent cheekbones and a pointed chin. The hollowness of his cheeks, occasioned by months of undernourishment and repeated forced marches, combined with his other features to shape the face

in the form of a quaint, inverted triangle. That unlikely physiognomy was livened by a pair of ardent eyes which lent it the dreamy air of an intellectual turned revolutionary. He was only twenty-five but among the illiterate peasant youngsters making up the bulk of the Red Army he was considered an "elder".

"I'm not sleepy," Cheng Yin replied.

Old Yeh sat down next to Cheng Yin. "I know what you're thinking," he said. His voice was cultured and well-modulated. "Things will be different this time. Future generations will remember what we are about to achieve."

They were bosom friends and had seen much action together. Both were educated men, steeped in history and legends, and both knew that this idyllic setting had been the location for some horrendous blood-lettings. During the period of the Warring States, two thousand four hundred years ago, legendary armies had fought epic battles and perished here. Just seventy years ago, 40,000 Taiping rebels had been trapped and slaughtered on the banks of the Tatu River by the armies of the Ching Emperor. But neither could give voice to such chilling knowledge. Their comrades were a superstitious lot and any hint of past carnages at that spot would completely destroy their faith in the success of their mission.

"Look at us," Cheng Yin said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "We marched out of southern Kiangsi last October with a force of eighty or ninety thousand. Now we are down to barely twenty thousand. Too much blood has already been spilt. And for what? We don't even know where we're heading. We're running around like dogs chasing their own tails. Do our leaders really know what they're about? Do they have a plan? Rumours are rife, of serious disagreements between our leaders and the foreigner from the Comintern. And all the while the enemy is closing in, hammering us. We are like sitting ducks."

"That's why we must capture Luting Bridge," Old Yeh whispered back. "We must have faith. If we believe in the Revolution we must carry on, through thick and thin. Circumstances are against us. That bridge provides our only means of escape. The future of the Revolution rests upon its capture and the Second Company has been chosen for the honour."

Cheng Yin snorted. "Twenty-two men leading a suicide attack! We don't even know what's waiting for us on the other side! There may be hundreds of defenders. What we know for sure is that they've got two machine guns, perhaps also mortars."

"Have faith. I'll be right there with you. Intelligence reports suggest that, apart from the machine guns, the defenders are armed only with antiquated rifles. Once we've knocked out the machine guns, the rest should be easy. It's a good day for fame and glory. Take a rest. You'll need all the energy you have. I've got things to attend to."

After Old Yeh had left, Cheng Yin allowed himself to contemplate the unthinkable. Should the Second Company fail, the lazy, sun-splashed day might well turn out to be a good one for dying. He could visualize his comrades being cut down on the banks of the Tatu River just like the Taiping rebels seventy years earlier. Always so much blood being traded for so many beguiling dreams!

He had no fear of death. In the three years since joining the Red Army he had seen enough of it to last many lifetimes. Everyone had to die, sooner or later. It all boiled down to how. One could perish like a gnat, squashed between the fingers of fate, or one could go like a man, shouting defiance at the sky. His only regret was that he never told his unhappy father that he loved him. Now it was too late.

His father was a man of education, who knew the difference between right and wrong. The problem was that the poor man could never stand up for what was right or lead the life he desired. Working as a rent collector for an absentee landlord was deeply repugnant to his instincts. Yet he lacked the will to cast aside the comfortable living and the opium pipe that came with it. He was fearful of inflicting hardship upon his son and sought escape through pipe dreams.

Cheng Yin would not have minded hardship. What he could not stand was to see his father being sorrowful and sad. As a child he had often gone with his father on rent collecting missions, escorted by two bodyguards, both experts with sword and staff. At first he enjoyed those trips because they took him to places he had never seen and because the bodyguards gave him lessons in kung fu during stop-overs on their journeys.

But as he grew older the crushing poverty of the peasants in the arid uplands of Anhui troubled him. They seemed aged before their time, worlds away from the wealth, the servants, the opium couches and the chirpy young concubines at the home of his father's employer. When he went with his father to deliver the accumulated takings, those pretty, giggling women used to ruffle his hair and pinch his cheeks. The sweetmeats they offered had seemed an exceptional treat at first. Afterwards he regarded their touch and their gifts as unclean.

Gradually he lost respect for the bodyguards too. He did not like the way they shouted at the peasants and threatened them physically. Their behaviour violated his notions of chivalry which those engaged in the martial arts ought to uphold.

On the other hand, his love and respect for his father grew. He caught his father surreptitiously slipping coins to peasants heavily in debt, only to go through the motion later of taking them back as rent in front of the bodyguards. Such discoveries led him to run away at the age of sixteen, in order to free his father from responsibility for providing for him.

Had his gesture made any difference? Had his father ceased to live like a gnat? It would be comforting to know before the attack the bridge began.

The whine of enemy mortar suddenly cut across his reflections. Two shells had been lobbed from across the river. One landed harmlessly on a patch of irises but the second found a kitchen detail arranging provisions for the next meal. One cook was killed and two others slightly wounded.

Pandemonium broke out among the resting men. Some yelled for medics. Others rushed for cover.

“Shit! They've got mortars!” someone yelled.

The death inflicted upon a non-combatant without reason enraged the men. Those manning mortars wanted to respond. But the battalion commander stopped them. “You'll get your

revenge soon enough," he said. "Just calm down. We can't afford to damage the bridge. That is the sole consideration at this stage."

From his vantage point Cheng Yin examined Luting Bridge again. It was a single-span construction of about a hundred yards long, built almost two and a half centuries ago during the reign of Emperor Kang Hsi. It consisted of thirteen giant iron chains with links of more than five inches in diameter. The chains were embedded into great stone buttresses hidden inside red bridge houses with jaunty curved roofs on both sides of the river.

Nine of the chains had been set in a parallel pattern, held together at regular intervals by metal bars. They supported heavy wooden boards which formed the floor of the bridge. Two further chains on either side, set higher and connected with palings, served as crude guard-rails.

Four hundred feet below the bridge raged the turbulent Tatu River. It tumbled down from the highlands of Chinghai and was at that point squeezed between dark jagged cliffs. That natural constriction caused it to seethe with whirlpools and vicious cross-currents. The agonized wailing of wind tearing to escape from the canyons provided a chilling accompaniment. Crossing the bridge was a dizzying and unnerving experience. It swayed like a hammock.

Those assigned to capture the bridge, however, could not count on the luxury of crossing on a wooden floor. The defenders had removed two-thirds of the boards, leaving seventy yards of naked chains as the only means of reaching the other side. Hostile fire was also a given.

As the hour set for the assault approached, Old Yeh assembled the team and went over the plan again. The men selected to lead the attack would crawl along the chains under cover of the battalion's heavy machine guns. The rest of the company, together with the Third Company, would follow, placing fresh boards on the bridge as fast as possible. The priority was to destroy the two machine gun nests and to hold the bridge till reinforcements got over.

As Cheng Yin listened to Old Yeh he slowly re-adjusted his cap. He knew at least some -- if not all of them -- would never see the end of the day. He hoped their deaths would not be as pointless as that of the poor cook's or of the tens of thousands who had already perished during the months of running skirmishes.

At precisely four o'clock the blare of bugles pierced the air. The martial notes sounding the charge stirred the blood. Cheng Yin raced forward and became the first to climb onto a chain. As he crawled along he heard encouragements being shouted by the rest of the battalion, accompanied by the cheerful chatter of supporting fire. By comparison, the responding fire sounded insipid, like the distant poppings of mouldy firecrackers.

The bridge swayed erratically as more and more men clambered onto its skeleton. Suddenly, the chains which had previously seemed so massive became like flimsy threads in a spider's web, with the men clinging to them like trapped flies.

After Cheng Yin had proceeded forty yards along his chain, the whizz of incoming bullets sounded more sharp and threatening. Then, without warning, a terrifying scream rent the air, receding in heart-stopping echoes into the depths of the canyon. It was followed quickly by another anguished cry. At the same time the metal web of the bridge tossed and bucked furiously.

Two of his comrades had fallen, either hit or slipped. Cheng Yin hung on desperately, trying to retain his balance and to ride out the swaying. Nausea welled up in him. His eyes, normally so bright and uncompromising, dimmed vertiginously. He seemed no longer in control of his muscles. He froze on his chain.

“Don’t look down! Keep moving!” a voice snapped at him from close by. It was Old Yeh.

The familiar voice steadied him. “I’m all right. Just go ahead. Nothing’s wrong,” he replied, panting.

His hands were sweating profusely and the links of the chain had become slippery under their grasp. He strengthened the grip on the chain with his thighs before taking one hand off to dry its palm on his trousers. Then he repeated the procedure with the other hand.

In the process he noticed a few comrades had already moved well ahead of him on their respective chains. He inhaled deeply to clear his dizziness. He had no fear of dying. He had counted on a swift soldier’s death, however, not a prolonged and agonizing ordeal suspended in mid-air. To fall screaming from a great height would rob his death of dignity.

After he had recovered his composure he resumed the journey. When he was about fifteen yards from the remaining boards, he saw flames leaping up. The defenders had set the boards alight with kerosene, in a desperate attempt to thwart the attack.

The first of his team had already mounted the boards. That sight, together with the leaping flames, exhilarated him. He knew the ordeal was almost over. He covered the remaining distance in a fury of energy. Once on the boarded part of the bridge, he drew his Mauser with one hand and unclasped a grenade with the other.

“Sha! Sha! Sha!” he yelled, as he charged towards the smoke and flames.

Others took up the cry. The sound of “Kill! Kill! Kill!” reverberated all around.

He fired his Mauser as he ran and when he was within throwing distance he launched grenade after grenade. As he charged through the flames he knew that success was almost within reach. But before he could unclasp another grenade, he felt something strange happening to his legs. He crashed down onto the burning boards and hit his head with great force.

He felt no pain, however, as he crashed onto the burning boards. He was only aware of flames licking at his clothes. In that one brief, devastating moment before slipping consciousness he smiled. He knew he was not going to die like a gnat.

A Good Day for Dying has appeared in **The New Writer** in Britain.