

The Puppet Master

Hong Kong, May 1978:

Cheng Ching stepped out of his air-conditioned office onto the private balcony and immediately the heat of summer enveloped him like a warm, damp towel. He had been in Hong Kong for two months but still found its humidity uncomfortable, although he was wearing little more than a white shirt and a pair of dark blue Dacron trousers.

The humidity was not the only thing he found disagreeable. The city's cocky edifices of glass and concrete seemed to ignore the harmonies of nature. Their pointed spirals seemed to poke into the heavens while their oblique planes and angles formed narrow, sunless canyons, thick with shadows, as if designed for ambushes and dirty deeds.

As a good Communist, he was not overly preoccupied with the harmonies of nature. And yet, as a Chinese, how could he avoid an attachment to nature? It was in the blood. But he was not in this self-satisfied place to enjoy the pleasures of natural things. It was to discharge his patriotic duties. The wealth and materialism all around provided fertile ground for spying, corruption and the exploitation of human frailties. In the short time he had been in post he had already developed an ambivalence towards the city and its inhabitants. The whole place seemed to reek of a money sickness. Even the very young were masked by precocious cunning.

From thirteen floors below, the noises of the city billowed up towards him, jarring, insistent and full of vulgar energy. From the moment he committed himself to his adoptive father's quest to rid China of the Gang of Four, he knew that success would bring him to this uncongenial place. It was, he supposed, less disagreeable than the place he might have ended up in if the coup had failed!

General Yeh had instructed him that his first task was to neutralize the remaining supporters of the Gang of Four in Hong Kong. Then he would have to ensure the continued generation of foreign exchange to support the Four Modernizations. To that latter end he would have to assume oversight over the vast complex of banks, newspapers, schools, trade unions, department stores, travel agencies, shipping lines, trading companies and other economic, cultural and artistic organizations controlled by the Party in Hong Kong.

Finally, there was the responsibility for security and intelligence matters, securing by fair means or foul information on the latest Western technology and weaponry. All in all a daunting undertaking! The prospect of presiding over inter-ministerial and inter-provincial jealousies was already disheartening him. The saving grace was that he was accountable only to the Secretary-General of the Party and to his adoptive father. General Yeh had by then assumed the positions of Deputy Chairman of the Military Affairs Commission and Chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army.

To the world at large, he was a deputy manager in the foreign exchange department of the Hong Kong branch of one of China's state banks. Only a couple of members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo had been appraised fully of the exact nature his job. In Hong Kong,

only the Director of the New China News Agency, as de facto representative of the Chinese government and Chairman of the Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee, had been given an indication of his authority.

Cheng Ching continued to brood over those responsibilities on the balcony. With so many overlapping layers of authority, with so much jockeying for power, he was like a puppet master controlling too many strings. If he got them tangled the consequences could be catastrophic. How much more pleasant if he could lay them all down to return to Thirsty Hills. His mother could do with his help. And there was still the unfulfilled promise to his father to work for the village. When would he ever honour that?

Those thoughts made him turn abruptly to return to his office. He carefully locked the French windows behind him and reset the alarm.

His office was by no means the kind used by a lowly functionary. Its parquet flooring was partially covered by a thick, hand-woven Tientsin carpet and there was the rare luxury of an attached bathroom and toilet. A painting of misty mountains and gentle waterfalls hung on a wall and beneath it stretched a long sofa with his jacket carelessly thrown upon it. Next to the sofa was the door to the room. It was steel-lined and soundproof. Beyond it lay an ante-room attended by two young men of military bearing and two women private secretaries.

The most unusual feature in the room was a rare six-foot-tall Chubb safe embedded into the wall and equipped with both a combination lock and a key lock.

Cheng Ching went over to the safe and twirled the combination lock. He extracted from beneath his shirt a metal chain holding two keys and inserted the appropriate one.

The safe was divided into two compartments, by a pair of metal drawers set across the middle. Both the upper and the lower compartments contained files distinguished by jackets of different colours. He selected three and carried them back to his rosewood desk. Then he returned to the safe, pulled out one of the metal drawers and extracted two small code books. In the process two photographs fell to the floor.

He picked them up. One was of a fair-haired Westerner and a girl in a floral calico dress. The other showed himself and a beautiful girl, both in the uniform of the People's Liberation Army. He gazed at the latter photograph. He had taken that with Ying twenty-four years ago, almost to the day, he thought wistfully. How many twenty-four years were there in a lifetime? Ying was now married and out of reach. He was married too, to the Party and the nation. There was no point spending the next twenty-four years dreaming of what might have been. He replaced the photographs in the drawer and returned to his desk with the code books.

As he sat down he saw the Chinese painting with misty mountains confronting him. What was reality and what was illusion, he wondered. Were those mountains any less real than the three telephones with scramblers on his desk?

He smiled ironically to himself. A spymaster and overlord! One had to be some sort of crazy romantic to believe that killings and dirty deeds were essential to a better world!

Of the three telephones on his desk, one was red. It was his secure line to Peking. He was about to compose a coded message to his adoptive father when one of the black telephones

rang. It was one of his secretaries informing him that the afternoon despatch box had arrived. He told her to bring it.

The secretary placed a black box on the desk and retreated.

Cheng Ching took the chain from around his neck and unlocked the box with the second key. Among the documents inside were copies of Internal Reference News and Reference Materials, two secret compilations regularly distributed to cadres of ministerial rank and above. His copies had been couriered from Peking. There was also a summary of the Q List interceptions from the previous day.

Cheng Ching quickly scanned the documents from Peking. After satisfying himself that none required immediate attention, he turned to the summary of the Q List interceptions.

The Q List was a document drawn up by the British Special Branch containing the names and addresses of people and organizations in Hong Kong whose mail would be intercepted. They might be drug traffickers, triad bosses, key members of Communist organizations, local personalities with dubious affiliations and lawyers, bankers and accountants involved in money laundering or other shady deeds. Sometimes several targets might be located at a single address. When the name for a particular target was unknown, only the address would appear in the Q List and all letters addressed there would be examined.

Interceptions, he had already learnt, were effected at the General Post Office. The list was regularly updated and made available to the Postmaster General on a personal basis. The Postmaster General saw to it that the Sorting Office placed all targeted correspondence in a special pigeonhole. During the night, workers specially trained by the Special Branch would open, photograph and re-seal designated letters, before returning them for normal delivery, albeit a day late.

The Special Branch had failed to realize, Cheng Ching reflected with satisfaction, that two of the postal workers assigned to the clandestine work belonged to one of his intelligence units. When they photographed letters for the Special Branch, they also made copies for the Motherland.

It would be normal for those on the Q List to have their telephones tapped as well. But his agents had not yet penetrated the relevant section of the Hong Kong Telephone Company.

What irritated Cheng Ching was his inability to discover what the letter Q stood for. He had gone over and over again all the English words he knew beginning with a Q. He had consulted the Oxford Dictionary and had eventually narrowed possibilities down to quarry, queer, questionable and quisling. But his inability to settle on a definitive answer bothered him like a recurring itch.

As he went through the day's interceptions, he noted with surprise that Chu Wing-seng's name had been added. How two-faced the British were! They would appoint a person to sit on their innermost council one day and rifle his mail the next. And all the while they would mouth their rubbish about the rule of law and the sanctity of the Royal Mail.

He wondered suddenly if the British knew their Q List arrangements had been compromised. If so, would they root out his agents or keep them on in order to feed through

misleading information? He would have to establish the truth. In the meantime, information from that source had to be treated with circumspection.

But what of Chu Wing-seng? Why had the British targeted him? He had never met the man. There had been no inkling in Chu's dossier of any involvement in crime. Could it be political? Chu had no Party affiliations, though he had been cultivating a number of senior cadres in Peking and in Kwangtung Province. At the same time his corporation maintained an office in Taiwan. All indications pointed to Chu being more interested in profits than principles. He must order a fresh probe. Possibly he might raise the matter at the next meeting of the Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee.

Cheng Ching opened one of the files taken from the safe. It dealt with his bank's involvement with Chu Wing-seng and the Gold Star group. He flipped through it because he had been invited, along with other managers in the bank, to a cocktail party hosted by Chu Wing-seng that afternoon. He had to brief himself. But he found the information in the file well short of requirement.

Cheng Ching completed his coded message to General Yeh and saw to its despatch. He then put the files and the contents of the afternoon despatch box into the Chubb safe. He stretched himself and had a quick wash in the bathroom.

He then picked up his jacket from the sofa and headed for Chu's cocktail party.