

## Another Stroll in the Garden

### **Peking, March 1982:**

Although Cheng Ching took the morning flight from Hong Kong, it was late afternoon by the time he arrived at General Yeh's home in Chung Nan Hai. His adoptive father's physical decline was more noticeable. Years of living on the political edge had taken their toll. His wife's death the previous year had not helped. The old man's hair had gone whiter and he now required the aid of a walking stick. A fresh note of urgency settled into his voice, as if conscious of Time's headlong rush. His mind, however, remained sharp and lucid.

"Trust you've swept for bugs," Cheng Ching remarked, as he offered an arm on the way to the garden.

"Yes." The General took the arm. "Nothing found. Those shenanigans seem to have stopped once the Gang of Four got put away."

"No harm in being careful. Plenty of their supporters around, itching to worm their way back."

The spring air was fresh and clean. A hesitant sunset cast a soft and gentle light upon the garden. Here and there, in accordance with traditional arrangements, a solitary cypress or pine stood like a dignified sentinel guarding the re-creations of nature: a lotus pond, an austere rockery, a network of mossy winding paths. Now and then magpies and ravens cut through the stillness with their cries. Peonies and chrysanthemums were unfolding in abundance.

"Erh Fu, why have you sent for me?" Cheng Ching asked as they began their walk.

"Several reasons," the General replied. "I want to know about Hong Kong and the British strategy at first hand. As I've told you, they've stirred up the issue of the New Territories lease. We've more pressing matters to attend to than that wretched sideshow. Can't understand why they can't follow the Portuguese example. Leave historical problems to be dealt with when the time is ripe. I suppose they're up to their old tricks, harrying when they judge their opponents weak."

Cheng Ching shook his head. "Not necessarily, Erh Fu. The British don't understand our ways. They're tripping over their own legalisms. The New Territories account for ninety-two percent of the colony. They've lease plots of it as Crown land for varying periods, up till the middle of 1997, raising very substantial revenue in the process.

"The trouble is they're obsessed with legality, since the leases are based on one or the other of the unequal treaties. They have embellished their possession with Letters Patent, Orders in Council and heaven knows what else. Some key provisions expire in 1997. To their legalistic way of thinking, an end of those provisions mean an end to Crown leases, and ergo an end to significant revenue. Holders of existing leases cannot have them renewed or extended beyond 1997, leaving them with wasting assets. Banks, insurance companies and mortgage lenders in turn face problems. The big money boys have sunk a lot into Hong Kong, earning fabulous returns. Historically they've been doing a turn every four or five years. They naturally want such a

satisfactory state of affairs to continue, with full legal coverage to boot. That's why they've been pressuring the government to get an extended agreement."

"But 1997 has no significance from our point of view. We've always been prepared to let that date slip, if it suited our purpose. By the same token, we have made known that we scrupulously retained our right to take Hong Kong back anytime we wanted."

"I know, Erh Fu. The British recognize they cannot hold the territory against our wishes. But they also figure we're not yet ready for a row. That's why they're playing upon what they consider their legal right under international law."

"What cheek! They weren't bothered by legal rights a hundred and fifty years ago when they squatted around peddling opium. If they want to keep making money in Hong Kong they should shut their mouths and take their chances. Aren't capitalists supposed to be risk-takers?"

"A fallacy, I fear," Cheng Ching said. "The bigger a corporation gets, the more cautious it becomes. At the first whiff of uncertainty, corporations make for the door, regardless of the ruin they may leave behind. They did that to Hong Kong in '67 and they'll do it again if things don't go their way. They want to have their golden goose and to eat it as well."

"Well, now that that damn issue has been raised, we must deal with it. We've told them bluntly Chinese sovereignty had to be admitted before talks but they won't listen. Just had one of their ministers here, ostensibly to prepare for a state visit by Chairman Hua, but he kept neighing about Hong Kong in a disgusting nasal way. By the by, for your ears only, we're trying to ease Hua out. He's been developing a fondness for the personality cult, like old Mao."

Cheng Ching sighed. "Can't our leaders ever shake off that emperor complex?"

"The Central Committee has recently decided to take back Hong Kong. Serve the Brits right for stoking the issue. A task force has been appointed to handle transitional issues. Recommendations will come before the Politburo soon. I need regular assessments from you. I don't want decisions taken based on old inflexibilities or false assumptions. I want my own thinking to be clear. Cadres in Hong Kong don't always report actual situations on the ground. Don't understand why they are reporting the masses there are in favour of continued British rule. Aren't the Chinese there patriotic? How can anyone prefer being ruled by foreigners rather than their own people?"

Cheng Ching bowed his head. "Some cadres have been in Hong Kong too long, grown accustomed to a bourgeois lifestyle. They've become like radishes, red only on the outside. Most Hong Kong people are emotionally divided. They're proud of being Chinese and don't like being bossed by foreigners. But on the other hand they're afraid of change.

"The British have been very clever. They've given them more or less a free hand to make money, through a policy touted variously as 'free enterprise' or 'positive non-interventionism'. It's humbug, of course, but it suits local instincts.

"What they've done is to secure the semi-monopolistic position of the vested interests and then throw open the rest to a sort of dog-eat-dog competition. A lot of locals have done well, opening small factories, trading, speculating on stocks and shares, providing services of various kinds and paying bribes to get round rules and regulations. Many fear the end of such free-

wheeling ways. They know it's easier to pull wool over British eyes than over ours. To that extent the assessments of our cadres are correct. It's the devil they know rather than the devil they don't."

"How can we alter that perceptions, before we go public with our intentions?"

"Very difficult question. The Politburo and the whole Party must understand that Hong Kong is not like China. We can't control information there. It's wide open. At the last count there are over seventy newspapers and 400 periodicals, not to mention two private television stations and three radio stations. They publish what they like. In the past we've supplied some of them with material to expose the private lives of the Gang of Four. They can just as easily be turned against us."

"Can't we prevent that?"

Cheng Ching shook his head. "Impossible. People in Hong Kong have also always been free to come and go. Don't need exit visas. Same with money. Professionals are marketable all over the world. China desperately needs their talents. Frighten them and they'll leave in droves. A great many have left already. We must persuade those remaining to stay and those who have left to return."

"How?"

"Erh fu, you must think me a genius who has all the answers."

"I do," the General said, smiling and squeezing Cheng Ching's arm affectionately.

"The people need reassurance that Chinese rule will not adversely affect their way of life. More talk of accumulating wealth not being a crime will go down well. Also the switching of emphasis from Marxist-Leninist and Mao Tse-tung Thought to 'socialism with market characteristics'."

The two paused in front of the rockery, made from eroded stones, grotesquely shaped, dredged from the bottom of Lake Tai. Such stones, moulded by sand and tide, had been in the lake for centuries. How many centuries, Cheng Ching wondered, would it take for his nation to arrive at a similar state of refinement.

"I came across a technological process known as reverse osmosis," Cheng Ching said, when their stroll resumed. "It's for converting sewage into drinking water. We need something similar politically, to convert the five million citizens of Hong Kong into good patriotic Chinese."

"I've learnt a few tricks in Hong Kong. One of them concerns commercial advertising. When making an advertisement, the advertiser does not need to tell the truth, only to create an impression that what is being stated is true. The same principle can be applied to politics. For example, we can pledge to allow only Hong Kong people to run Hong Kong after the resumption of sovereignty. That will go down very well because only the British make the big decisions at the moment and there is much resentment about this locally."

"People will take that pledge to mean a commitment by the Central Government not to control local affairs. But that is not what the pledge means at all. Why? Because under British law anyone who has lived in Hong Kong for seven years is considered a 'Hong Kong believer'. We have thousands of agents and cadres living there, some for many years. They are all good and proper 'Hong Kong believers', including several members of the Work Committee. We can send

more, if necessary, before the resumption of sovereignty fifteen years down the road. We already have people in place to exercise control if the Party so desires. Should that eventuality arise, who can say we have broken any pledge?"

"I see! You are suggesting that we turn the old British legalistic game back against them!"

"Precisely. Britain will be forced to go along. It'll want to say what a marvellous job it has been doing to secure Hong Kong interests. It can hardly draw attention to the lack of substance in the pledge. It knows that its national interest lies in China itself and would be glad to disengage from responsibility for its troublesome trusteeship with a minimum of fuss.

"We have one further advantage in dealing with outsiders. The rest of the world isn't clear how we operate. They think Communist governments must be monolithic, with every pronouncement cast in stone. They don't appreciate our many levels of government and the ill-defined overlappings between the Party and the state. An announcement by one official does not imply that the contents have been handed down from on high. We can test an idea by using a sympathetic Hong Kong businessman or a mere city official. If the idea goes down well, a Provincial Governor or Minister might repeat it. We need not adopt any policy until it has been proven acceptable."

"Wonderful! Confusion for confusion's sake!" the General exclaimed with pleasure. "You are a genius! Assurances and mirages! That's undoubtedly the way to go. Tell them they can live as before under Chinese rule, betting themselves silly on horse racing and dancing throughout the night. One country, two systems. Ha! Brilliant!"

"There are, unfortunately, adverse effects for ourselves," Cheng Ching cautioned, rubbing the old scar on his cheek.

"You don't have to tell me that! I get cross when I see billboards around Peking advertising brandy and face creams where once they proclaimed good Socialist ideals!"

"Whatever we allow for Hong Kong will create demand for similar treatment here, and I'm not referring just to consumer preferences. I'm fearful, Erh Fu, of a contagion from Hong Kong. Corruption and sharp practices are already evident. Crime, prostitution and drug-taking are rising. The level of education in our country is low. There's a lost generation out there. People are losing jobs under privatization. Cadres have become corrupt, losing their revolutionary spirit and their socialist honesty. To open the country may be necessary but pace and degree must be strictly controlled. Hong Kong-style wheeling and dealing is not to be recommended for us, even if we're advanced enough socially. It could make for great instability. Don't forget, we still have the triads to deal with. They're more sophisticated than our Public Security officials. We can't have them running riot. The old methods for handling them may no longer work."

The General nodded and sighed. "I understand. Don't mind telling you, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission has just produced a secret report about top cadres speculating, profiteering and misusing state funds. A few have been sucked unwittingly into triad connections. No one wants to cure one national sickness to succumb to another."

The two men had completed two slow circuits of the garden. When they came to a bench Cheng Ching suggested resting a while. The sun had dissolved into little more than a splash of brightness on the distant horizon. Only the soughing of leaves breached the silence.

“What do you know about a Hong Kong man named Chu Wing-seng?” the General asked, after they had been seated.

“Quite a lot,” Cheng Ching replied. “Have been investigating him, to determine his political orientations. Epitome of a Hong Kong tycoon, popular because he satisfies the greed of his investors but ruthless in pursuing his own goals. Useful man to have on your side but could be a formidable enemy. His methods are regarded by many as underhanded but my people have not been able to pin anything criminal on him. Why do you ask?”

“He’s been making a splash here. In very thick with a couple of members on the Central Committee. Taught them how to make quick money. Don’t exactly know how. There’s talk of insider trading and other activities I’ve never even heard of. Got some provincial leaders excited about starting a stock exchange in Shanghai. Building up quite a following.

“Rumour has it he’s got a few Kwangtung cadres involved in an organ transplant institute in Canton. Modernizing medical facilities, they called it. Talk of earning foreign exchange by selling organs from executed criminals to foreigners. Communists are supposed to be atheists and unsentimental but that’s going too far. Most people, even criminals, still want to enter the next world with their body parts intact. We can’t strip bodies like abandoned cars. Public opinion will turn against us. We haven’t gone through a revolution to sink to this!”

“I’ve heard those rumours,” Cheng Ching said. “That’s what I fear about allowing profits to dictate policy. Everybody who knows about that transplant project is tight-lipped. Chu’s been bringing doctors to Hong Kong to study transplant techniques. On the face of it, everything seems above board. Prison personnel too, ostensibly to set up research clinics using volunteers from the convict population. My people are still investigating.”

“Can’t always observe the niceties. Chu has money and money corrupts. Available evidence suggests Chu has already gone too far. We may have to be dealt with him sooner or later.”

“He visits China often. Can’t he be warned off?”

“Too many high connections,” the General said. “We need all the support we can muster in the Central Committee. Don’t know the extent of his influence either. He is already a destabilizing influence here. If the head of a serpent is severed, the rest will wither away. One day we may have to take drastic action.”

Cheng Ching’s throat tightened. Previously he had been an unquestioning believer in the cause. He had fought for it in Korea. Though doubts arose during the Cultural Revolution, he still subordinated himself to the collective wisdom of the Party. The harsh treatments meted out to many had been endorsed by the Central Committee. Likewise, the moves against the Gang of Four. But for a general and his adopted son to pronounce in secret the death of another man seemed wrong, no matter how high-minded the motive. That would be to return to the ways of the Gang of Four. It seemed almost laughable, in retrospect, that he should have been so concerned over

disclosing details of Chu's private family affairs when he was now discussing Chu's possible elimination.

"You don't want me to finish my investigations first?" Cheng Ching asked.

"Yes, so long it does not drag on. Events are moving too fast. We can't afford to wait too long."

"You intend to have him dealt with in Hong Kong?"

"No, nor in China either. When the necessity arises he must be disposed of in circumstances so commonplace that no question would arise. Are there not mountain roads in Switzerland prone to accidents? Or perhaps a run-of-the-mill mugging in New York. You plan on what's best."

Cheng Ching bowed his head. He might not be doing the actual deed. It wouldn't be the same as blasting the brains out of that frightened American boy in Korea. But so long as he served the Party, there would always be fresh enemies to dispose of, fresh calls to duty. He understood why men of principle often sought solitude away from the world. He longed to quit the pressures of power-politics to return to the more measured life at Thirsty Hills.

"I'll start the planning process. It'll be complicated," he said. "Chu's travelling plans are unpredictable and chaotic."

The General smiled approvingly. "There are two other matters of importance I must discuss with you. You don't have to be told that politicians are chameleons. The Maoist of yesterday can become the dissident of today. Some well-meaning people in Hong Kong have been operating a pipeline to help dissidents out of the country. They think they are helping believers in democracy. The trouble is that they don't know enough about what's going on. We don't want supporters of the Gang of Four to escape justice. Instructions have gone out to Old Ironsides to tighten the net. You must do the same."

Cheng Ching nodded.

"You've done well," General Yeh continued. "You've got the Hong Kong operations in fine shape. Our armed forces have secured vital information and equipment. Soon it'll be time to bring you home."

"If all goes well, we should be replacing the Director in Hong Kong next year with a member of the Central Committee. The man we have in mind is currently Party Secretary of Kiangsu Province. A very good man. He should command enough standing in the Party to assume your functions as well as those of the Directorship. That'll make the chain of command less complicated in the run-up to 1997."

"I shall look forward to coming home! I've only seen my mother once since leaving for Hong Kong. It's about time I looked after her and keep my promise to my father. She's been struggling to carry on since his death."

"You can certainly return to Thirsty Hills for a spell. You deserve a holiday."

"Erh Fu, what do you mean 'for a spell'? I've done my fair share. I ought to go home and look after my mother."

“Stop this foolish talk. It’s good to be a filial son but even better to be a great patriot. You’re meant for high office.”

“No, Erh Fu, I don’t seek high office. I just want to lead an ordinary life from now on.”

“Because you don’t seek high office that’s why you must have it! Too many want it for the sake of fame or personal gain. People like you are rare. Your father has not misnamed you when he called you Cheng the Righteous. Can’t you see? My time is short. What we seek to achieve will take generations. You must carry on after I’m gone. Inspire others to continue after you’ve gone. Otherwise, what would we have lived for?”

“Here’s what I’ve got planned for you. Return to Anhui, build up a power base. Without a provincial base, you won’t get far at the centre. Get yourself known, gather supporters. Bring improvements there, just as your father has done. I’ll use my influence to get you into the Central Committee. From there you can work your way into the Politburo. Then steer our country in the right direction. I’m counting on you.”

Cheng Ching turned to look at his adoptive father. In the fading light, the General’s white hair and sunken cheeks seemed to speak of weariness and old age. But defiance still shone in his eyes. The sight filled Cheng Ching with awe. He felt ashamed for wearying of the struggle, for wanting to hide away at Thirsty Hills. His adoptive father’s face told him that the thirty years given to his country were not enough. He owed it to his father, to Ying, Old Tung, Mad Fan and countless others to carry on. Otherwise how could their sacrifices be endowed with purpose? He had no choice.

“Erh Fu, we had better go inside,” he said. “It’s getting chilly out here.”