

A Portrait of Comrade Cheng

Li Sang was buying time. There was nothing else to buy in Correction Facility Number Two. Every day there was one more than he had expected. How much longer could he avoid the beatings, the electrodes or the pit? He stood back and studied the portrait of Comrade Cheng again, picked up his brush and held it near the painting, then put it down. Could he sustain this ponderous progress for another week?

Comrade Cheng – Comrade Number Three to his subordinates – looked lifelike on the canvas, his vacant eyes staring from beneath his leather cap. He was larger on the canvas than he was in person and Wu Ling stepped back to examine the perspective again. He could have finished the painting two weeks ago but where would he be if he had? His survival depended on this portrait and he could not hurry it. Comrade Cheng had been away for four days and only needed one more sitting to complete it when he returned.

The portrait was taller than Li Sang, who stood on his wooden bunk to paint the upper part; there was no other furniture in the cell he had shared with the changing images of Comrade Cheng for nearly four weeks. Paint tubes and tins, brushes and rags for cleaning them were scattered over the concrete floor where Li Sang mixed his colours, their mottled residues the only break in the drabness of his cell – the grey concrete block walls, grey metal door and high, barred window. He spent the day painting and the night sleeping on a thin mattress on the slatted bunk. Whatever he did Comrade Cheng was always with him.

He had first seen Comrade Cheng walking towards him, flanked by four guards with automatic rifles, when he was digging. Li Sang gripped the handle of his shovel, unable to dig, unable to move. Would they take him away for interrogation? Cheng

was carrying a roll of paper and stopped in front of Li Sang who was half a metre deep in the hole they were digging. One of the guards pointed him out to Comrade Cheng who was so small that his chin was at Li Sang's eye level.

"Li Sang?" Cheng asked, and Li Sang bowed and gripped the handle of his shovel for support as the officer unrolled the paper to show him a pencil portrait of one of the guards. Would they accuse him of producing a bourgeois picture? With wasting his time at the Facility when he should have been digging?

"Did you draw this picture?" Comrade Cheng asked, holding it at the top and bottom. Was he upset? Was he angry? His face and voice gave nothing away.

Li Sang nodded. He couldn't deny it because the guard he had drawn was pointing an AK47 at him as he stood at Cheng's side.

"It's very good," said Cheng. Li Sang said nothing; was it a compliment or was Cheng taunting him?

"They say you're an artist. Is that correct?" Cheng asked. Li Sang nodded, still gripping his shovel. "You are obviously wasted here," said Cheng nodding towards the hole in which Li Sang and eight other men were standing, their pale blue uniforms darkened with irregular patches of sweat. The others had stopped digging to watch what was happening, leaning on their shovels as Cheng addressed Li Sang again.

"Can you paint as well as you can draw?" he asked. Li Sang nodded again. "Then you can paint my portrait," Cheng told him. "Start tomorrow morning. The guards will collect you instead of coming here."

Comrade Cheng rolled up the picture, turned round and walked back along the dusty path to the main buildings accompanied by the guards. Another guard, in charge of the diggers, shouted at them to get back to their work. Li Sang resumed digging the thin, rocky soil, relieved that they hadn't taken him away. Even digging was better than that.

He hadn't wanted to draw the guard's picture but couldn't argue with somebody holding an automatic rifle. It had been a quiet afternoon when the hole had been dug

for that day and the bodies that would fill it had not yet arrived. The diggers sat in the shade of a tree, on parched scrubland a hundred metres from the rear of the main buildings, waiting. Li Sang used a fallen twig to draw some birds, a mountain and two trees in the dusty earth. He hadn't drawn or painted anything for three weeks since he was arrested and brought to the facility. He had to draw something. The guard – as bored as the men he was guarding – noticed the impromptu artwork and asked who had done it. Wu Ling still had the twig in his hand and owned up.

The guard smiled. A first. "Could you draw my picture?" he asked. "I could get you a pencil and some paper." Li Sang nodded and forgot the guard's request as the first cartload of bodies arrived. They were all naked; some were still warm, bruised and bleeding as the diggers manhandled them into the pit before they shovelled grey-brown earth from the adjacent mound on top of them. Li Sang had sometimes recognised the faces of cellmates and neighbours from his village amongst the bodies but today the dead were all strangers.

Next day the guard brought two black pencils and a roll of paper as they waited for the bodies to arrive. Li Sang told him he would need a board to lean on and a day later the guard brought a piece of hardboard from the stores. That afternoon Li Sang sketched the guard, sitting with the board across his knees, while waiting for the bodies. He had seen men that had been digging taken away, only to be buried a day or two later, and he made sure that the portrait was unfinished so he would still be needed at the pit the following day.

The guard was pleased, very pleased, with his portrait and brought photographs of his wife and children for Li Sang to draw which he did every afternoon, taking his time to complete them, knowing that every day he was drawing was a day that he wasn't being interrogated. He still had to go back to the cell that he shared with other prisoners, to sleep on a bare concrete floor. Some came back at night from interrogation, bruised and shaking, to tell of beatings, having feet burned with hot metal or shocked with electrodes. Some didn't return: men were tortured until they

confessed, to be taken away and killed for the crimes they admitted. Those that didn't confess were killed for their intransigence. Some men returned to the cell too shocked to speak, knowing their questioning would resume the following day. One morning Li Sang woke to see a cellmate hanging from the bars of their cell, naked and tethered by strips torn from his pale blue prison uniform, his bulging eyes and purple face looking down at the others. He had avoided further interrogation but later that day Wu Ling would throw his body into the pit. Others survived only to suffer another day.

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Two armed guards pointed their rifles at Li Sang and prodded him towards Comrade Cheng's office, as arranged the previous afternoon. They had instructions to make a list of the materials needed for his portrait, which Li Sang gave them, deliberately adding items that he knew would be difficult, or impossible, to find. The revolutionaries had abolished and liberated property; now they could find and liberate this list. He was led into Cheng's office where Comrade Number Three sat and asked him how long the portrait would take.

"I don't know," said Li Sang. "Every portrait is different. It would have to be my best work. You would have to tell me if you were happy with it, or if anything needed to be changed."

Three days later, some of the materials – brushes, paints, canvas and a palette – arrived and the guards asked Li Sang to check them. His order was incomplete but in two days time Comrade Cheng would be back from the Revolutionary Council meeting to pose for him. The guards took a further inventory and told Li Sang to be ready.

After two more days of digging, Li Sang assembled his canvas in a small, empty room and the guards accompanied him as he struggled to carry the canvas and a calico sack full of paints and brushes along the corridor to Cheng's office where his

subject sat at a large wooden desk with two more guards holding rifles either side of him and a huge red, white and yellow Flag of the Revolution on the wall behind him.

"We must begin," said Cheng, as Li Sang assembled his materials and asked how the officer would like to be pictured. He suggested looking into the distance to his right, wearing his pale grey uniform and black leather cap, in front of the Flag of the Revolution. Li Sang drew a charcoal outline on the canvas to show Cheng these details and told him he would start from this and return to work on specific features later.

"Tomorrow, then," said Cheng. Li Sang packed away his materials and carried them outside.

"Where can I keep all this?" Li Sang asked the guards. He was led back to the main cell block where he was given a cell of his own: it had a bunk, a mattress and sheets.

"You are to work on the portrait undisturbed," one guard told him, and locked the door.

Next day Li Sang saw Comrade Cheng standing in his office for the first time, flanked, as ever, by two armed guards. He was very small, smaller than his portrait would be. He had six medals across his chest and Li Sang worked for half an hour, sketching out details that he would paint later in his cell. A day later he started on the uniform, its detail, the creases, the patterns of light. He counted the medals three times: today Cheng had seven. Li Sang said very little, only replying when Cheng asked whether his position was correct for the picture, and left after half-an-hour to add to his morning's work in his cell. He spent most of a morning looking at Comrade Cheng, focussed only on his eyes, knowing they were always the most important, and difficult, feature to capture in any portrait. Cheng's were not cruel or crazed but somehow worse than that – blank, cold and distant, as if part of him was always somewhere else. Could Li Sang capture that without offending his subject? Cheng showed no signs of being offended; he showed no signs of any emotion. He stood or

sat for an hour or more without speaking, his face set in permanent blankness, the hum of the air conditioning and occasional shuffling of his guards' boots the only sounds in his spacious office.

Back in his cell Li Sang mixed his oil paints, adding colours and layers as he worked on every feature, every outline, crease and shadow. He stood back to assess the perspective within the limited space. Cheng's portrait had to be as good as he could make it, whatever he felt about his subject. He removed details and added others, re-mixing colours and re-applying them until it gradually became as perfect as he wanted it to be. He didn't know if he would ever paint another portrait. This had to be his best work.

The slow days of posing, painting and filling in details continued with interruptions for Cheng's absences, and the finest of camel-hair brushes and three colours not being available – Li Sang particularly wanted a bright, golden yellow for the medals and the Flag of the Revolution. Cheng was brisk and keen to proceed during the morning sessions, but surprisingly unconcerned at the slow progress that Li Sang had made over three – nearly four – weeks. When he was paid for painting his clients' portraits, until a few weeks ago, he would have completed them, and sold them, in two days.

That time had ended when he was dragged from the back room of his house by the revolutionaries, past his sobbing wife and screaming daughter, and brought in an old truck to the Correction Facility. He had buried some men that came on the truck with him; he knew that his survival depended on painting that portrait but he couldn't paint it forever. He needed one last session with Comrade Cheng to get his face and eyes exactly right; achieving that constant lack of expression was more difficult than any smile or frown. Then he could spend three days making and gilding the frame. That would complete it. He covered the picture every night with a bedsheet so that face couldn't stare at him.

At the last sitting, Li Sang noticed that Comrade Cheng now had eight medals displayed across his chest as he put the last touches to his face. Had he got the eyes exactly right? He thought so as he made the final tiny brush strokes to complete Cheng's lifelike features. And the Flag of the Revolution – a white centre with bright yellow and red vertical edges - was finished to form the backdrop to his subject, who nodded his silent approval when shown his likeness.

That afternoon the guards allowed Li Sang to make the frame, standing over him as he used a saw and a hammer and taking them away after he had finished cutting the wood and nailing the corners. The glue dried overnight, then the undercoat dried and he carefully sanded the frame. Li Sang lay on his bunk, oblivious to the smell of paint and thinners that filled his cell, waiting for the first coat of gilding to dry. And then waiting another day for the second coat, wondering what would happen when the picture was completed. Would there be other portraits to paint and safe days to paint them? He couldn't cause any further delay and told the guard that Comrade Cheng's picture would be ready tomorrow morning. What then?

As Li Sang covered the painting with the sheet he grasped the rough grey cotton in his hands. He could tear it into strips; he could put it around his neck and suspend himself from the bars but the regime would have won if he did that. He lay on the bed and thought about Ai-shi and little Chen-chi. He wanted so much to be with them again. During the day he was glad of the distraction that Cheng's portrait provided but when he lay on his bed he wanted to see Chen-chi's cheeky smile before he kissed her goodnight and feel Ai-shi snuggling into him again. He hoped they were still alive as he tried to sleep.

He slept, then woke, then slept and woke again when the rising sun cast a shadow of the bars across the cell and onto the grey wall. He rose to work quickly and put the finishing touches to the portrait, standing back against the door to get the only perspective he could in that small space. He was satisfied: it was his best work. It

was ready and so was he. Li Sang took a last look at the portrait, signed the top left hand corner and covered it with the sheet.

He sat on his bunk until the guards arrived and walked behind Li Sang as he carried the covered picture along the corridors to Comrade Cheng's office where he was beckoned inside. He laid the painting against the left hand wall, to catch the maximum daylight from the window opposite, bowed to Comrade Cheng and removed the sheet with a flourish. Cheng stood to look at his portrait but didn't notice the background Flag of the Revolution - with blood trickling from its red margins - because he was staring at himself. His portrait didn't have its mouth open, as he did, but his image looked as real as himself. Almost alive. The eyes – brown, aloof and distant as his own - looked to his right below his black leather cap above a line of seventeen gold and silver medals strung across and beyond the left side of his grey uniformed chest, and his glistening red hands dripped blood into shiny crimson pools on the wooden floor and the stool on which he stood.