

FRENCH CONCESSION

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Xiao Bai

Translated from the Chinese by Chenxin Jiang

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This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights
are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents either are prod-
ucts of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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And walked like an assassin through the town,
And looked at men and did not like them,
But trembled if one passed him with a frown.

—W. H. AUDEN, *In Time of War:*
A Sonnet Sequence with a Verse Commentary

In fact, when the moment came, power had not so much to be seized as to be picked up. It has been said that more people were injured in the making of Eisenstein's great film *October* (1927) than had been hurt during the actual taking of the Winter Palace on 7th November 1917.

—ERIC HOBSBAWM, *The Age of Extremes:*
The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This story is set in 1931, or Year 20 of the Republic, the twentieth year after the revolution that overthrew the Ch'ing Dynasty and created the Republic of China. It takes place in the foreign concessions established by Britain, France, and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, extraterritorial jurisdictions in the heart of Shanghai. The British and American settlements were soon combined to form what was known as the International Settlement, whereas the French Concession remained independent. Both concessions were returned to the Chinese government during or shortly after the Second World War.

Spelling of Chinese names throughout mostly accords with the Wade-Giles system in use at the time, except where certain conventional names or spellings (such as the Whampoa) are more widely used.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

- Weiss Hsueh/Hsueh Wei-shih, a French-Chinese photojournalist who becomes an unofficial detective for the Political Section of the French Concession Police
- Therese Irxmayer/Lady Holly, a White Russian firearms dealer and Hsueh's lover
- Leng Hsiao-man, a member of a revolutionary cell and Hsueh's lover
- Ts'ao Chen-wu, Leng's second husband
- Wang Yang, Leng's first husband
- Ko Ya-min, a member of the cell
- Lieutenant Sarly, head of the Political Section of the French Concession Police
- Inspector Maron, head of a detective squad under the Political Section of the French Concession Police
- Ku Fu-kuang, leader of the revolutionary cell
- Park Kye-seong, a Korean member of the cell and Ku's right-hand man
- Lin P'ei-wen, head of one of the cell's units
- Ch'i, an ex-prostitute and Ku's lover
- Zung Ts-Mih, Therese's business partner from Hong Kong
- Yindee Zung/Ch'en Ying-ti, Zung Ts-Mih's sister
- Ah Kwai, Therese's maidservant from Hong Kong
- Tseng Nan-p'u, a functionary in Nanking's Central Bureau
- Cheng Yün-tuan, a secretary at Nanking's Investigative Unit for Party Affairs

- Secretary Ch'en, a senior member in the Communist Party and former leader in the student movement
- The poet from Marseille, a member of Inspector Maron's detective squad
- Commissioner Martin, an English commander at the International Settlement's Municipal Police
- Baron Franz Pidol, Luxembourg United Steel Company's chief representative in Shanghai
- Margot Pidol, Baron Pidol's wife and Therese's close friend
- Brenen Blair, Margot's lover
- Consul Baudez, the French consul in Shanghai
- Colonel Bichat, head of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps
- Sergeant Ch'eng Yu-t'ao/Pock-faced Ch'eng, head of North Gate Police Station
- M. Mallet, Chief of the French Concession Police
- Sawada-san, First Secretary at the Japanese consulate
- Li Pao-i, a newspaper reporter at the *Arsène Lupin*
- Tao Lili/Peach Girl, a prostitute at Moon Palace Dancing Hall
- Barker, an American
- The Boss, head of the Green Gang
- Morris Jr., prominent member of the Green Gang
- Ch'in Ch'i-ch'üan, a member of Lin's unit
- Fu, a member of the cell
- Li, a member of the cell
- Chou Li-min, a member of the cell
- Pearl Yeh, a famous actress
- Yan Feng, a cameraman at the Hua Sisters Motion Picture Studio
- Pierre Weiss, Hsueh's father
- Mr. and Mrs. Romantz, proprietors of the restaurant Bendigo
- Hugo Irxmayer, Therese's deceased husband

P R E L U D E

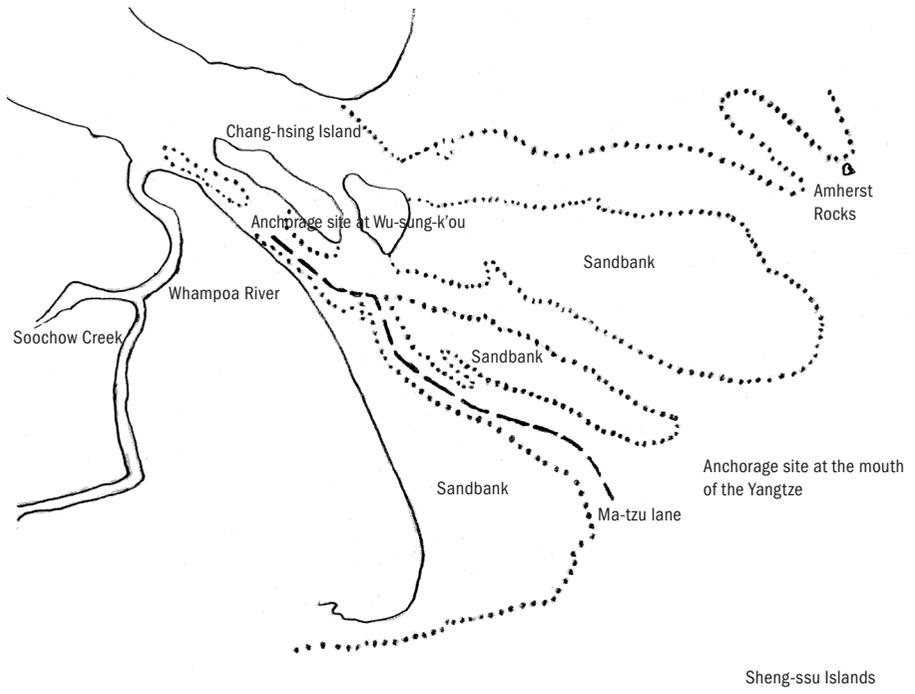
M A Y 1 9 , Y E A R 2 0 O F T H E R E P U B L I C .

2 : 2 4 A . M .

The walls of the cabin were trembling. A steam whistle piped two short blasts. Hsueh opened his eyes. He still had the covers pulled over his head, and the ebb and flow of waves sounded like thunder in a distant world. The world beneath the covers was warm and rocked gently. Therese's naked back shivered in the darkness. The ship's engine must be restarting.

A thick fog had blotted out the stars. Going out onto the deck right now would be like stepping into a freezing dark dream. The deck would be treacherously slippery, and he would have no sense of direction—he would barely even know where his own hands and feet were. He would hear the waves but be unable to see them in the endless darkness. He might see a buoy flickering dimly several hundred yards away, as if through uncountable layers of black gauze.

The *Paul Lecat* set off at full steam. In only a few hours, it would be high tide on the Yangtze, the only time when a large ship could sail safely through the Astraea Channel. There was a sandbank on the northern side of the channel, and the whole channel was sandlogged. When the tide was at its lowest, the shallowest stretches of river would be less than twenty meters deep. The *Paul Lecat* weighed 7,050 tons, and displaced about twenty-eight meters of water. It thus had two hours to reach the next anchorage site at Wu-sung-k'ou, the mouth of the Wu-sung River.



Sea lanes at the mouth of the Yangtze River

Halfway through the journey up the river, it had a close brush with disaster. A German cargo ship sailing out to sea passed it very narrowly—"pass port to port" was the entry the pilot would make in his logbook that day. The river was foggy. The pilot did not hear the other ship sound the horn at its bridge, and by the time he saw the red light on its port side, they were on course to collide. The *Paul Lecat* hastily turned fifteen degrees starboard to let the other ship pass. In so doing, it was nearly forced out of the channel and onto the muddy sandbanks.

With the door just a crack open, a sliver of red light filtered in. Hsueh opened the cabin door and was immediately terrified by the sight of the other ship advancing toward him like a huge building.

He crept back under the sheets. Therese was sleeping like a mother hog, her snores long and gentle.

His fingernails brushed across the cloud-shaped purple birthmark between her shoulder blades.

Although they were traveling together, he knew little about her apart from her name. After all, she had engaged his services as a lover, not as a spy.

She likes to chain-smoke, especially in bed. She knows a lot about antique jewelry. Her ink green garnet stone has a pattern like a horse's mane. She knows some mysterious people in Hong Kong and Saigon. Granted, some of these were his own inventions—strangers always stimulated Hsueh's imagination. He was a photographer, and he made his living peddling photographs to all the newspapers and magazines in Shanghai. If he was lucky, a single photograph of a burglary-murder scene might fetch fifty yuan.

The first time they had met was at the scene of a shooting, standing over the corpse. The second time was at Lily Bar in Hongkew, next to a massage place with lanterns outside that read *PARIS GIRLS*. She wasn't all that different from the Paris girls inside, he thought.

In fact, only recently had he learned her name, in the Hotel Continental in Hanoi, when he heard that man call her Therese. Before then, all he knew was that people called her Lady Holly. He gradually worked out that she was White Russian and not German, as she was

said to be. She fascinated him. They spent their nights in places like the Astor House Hotel in Shanghai or the Hotel Continental in Hanoi. Spacious balconies, wide corridors, electric ceiling fans whirring discreetly. The air would be thick with the lascivious smell of overripe tropical fruit. The wind would blow open the pale green curtains and dry their glistening backs. He was almost in love with her.

It was now low tide, and the *Paul Lecat* would have to be moored in a temporary anchorage for twelve hours, until another pilot boarded the ship at the next high tide and navigated it into the Whampoa.

He yanked off the sheets, leaped out of bed, and got dressed. Only when he stepped outside did he realize that they were nowhere near their destination. The horizon grew bright, and the wind pierced his shirt. He decided to go to the restaurant for a cup of hot tea.

The railing, starboard side. Another first-class cabin. Leng Hsiao-man was about to steal out of bed. She could not risk disturbing Ts'ao Chen-wu, sound asleep beside her. According to the plan, she had to go to the telegraph room and send a telegram.

Ts'ao, her husband, had been sent to Hong Kong on a secret mission to arrange the visit of an influential man in the ruling Kuomintang party. He was now returning to Shanghai to meet that man in the French Concession, and accompany him back to Canton via Hong Kong and Shen-chen.

Ts'ao's snores rose and fell, like his temper. He was brusque and yet gentle, hard to pin down. She was in a pensive mood, though not because of him. She had scoured her memory of their life together, struggling to find things she loathed about him, good reasons for hating him, yet nothing she could think of justified what she was about to do. But surely she had to have a higher cause to live for.

*Anchored Wu-sung-k'ou await high tide STOP onshore before ten
STOP pier as agreed Ts'ao*

The telegraph operator sent these words to a Shanghai wireless shore station with the call letters XSH, to a Mr. Lin P'ei-wen, who

identified himself as the man responsible for welcoming the delegation. Half an hour later, at the Telegraph Office on 21B Szechuen Road, the night shift operator opened the glass door and went up to the counter. He handed the telegram to Mr. Lin, who had been waiting there for more than two hours.

The door to the main dining room was shut. Hsueh returned to the room, where Therese was still sleeping. In Hanoi, he had rushed out of the hotel toward the pier in a rage. He had made up his mind to ignore her, to stop sleeping in her room or her bed. But even when he booked himself a berth in third class, all she did was mock him. At the pier, he realized he had stepped on a piece of chewed-up betel nut. Standing beneath a palm tree, he looked at the Vietnamese hawkers dressed in black on the pier, and the stench of sweat made him feel queasy. He found himself wandering back to the hotel.

She hadn't bothered to pursue him at all—she had known he would come back of his own accord. He was young, and she was seven or eight years older. She had the upper hand. Who is that man? Who is he? he had asked. Mr. Zung, she said. In Hong Kong, she had gone out alone and left him at the hotel all day. At first he assumed she had gone to meet more of those White Russians forced to sell their last few pieces of jewelry. Then on the journey from Hong Kong to Haiphong, he'd seen this Mr. Zung on the boat. Therese pretended she didn't know him, but he had traveled with them all the way to Hanoi. In the hotel lobby, as he was coming downstairs to buy a packet of cigarettes, Hsueh overheard that man call her by her name—Therese—and saw her slip into his room. She had not come back to the room until midnight. He had questioned her angrily, pushed her against the wall, torn her skirt and silk drawers off, and reached his hand in to touch her. She had not even bathed. She kept smiling at him until he asked, Who is he? Why has he been following us since Hong Kong?

She brushed him off, laughing at him. Who do you think you are? she asked. He thought he was in love with her. He loved the way she smoked. Instead of using one of those agate or jade ciga-

rette holders, she would let the tobacco stain the bright curve of her lips, while her short black tousled hair cast flickering shadows on her pale face.

Now he was sitting on the side of the bed while she slept. Her handbag lay on the bedside table, and he opened it. He had never looked through her things before. A ray of early morning light sliced through the cabin window, illuminating a dark metallic outline. He put his hand inside the bag. It was a pistol—

The bag was snatched from his hands, and someone kicked him so hard he thudded to the floor. It was Therese, sitting on the pillow. The gray sky outside had turned a shade of vermillion, and she sat looking at him, backlit by the morning sun, her bare shoulders almost transparent. His eyes watered. He got up, snatched up his camera, and went outside.

The fog had lifted, and the river was sparkling. The white deck was stained bloodred with the dawn. He went down to the lower deck and toward the front of the ship. Coils of rope, sheets of canvas, and all the odd-numbered lifeboats were lined up toward the front of the boat by number, with the odd numbers on the starboard side while the even numbers were on the port side. A crowd had gathered by the railing to watch the sunrise.

There were a handful of tables and chairs, but the canvas seats were wet, and no one was sitting down. The bow of the ship was even windier, and it was empty. He leaned against the railing. Eight ships were anchored here in a fan-shaped formation, each with her bow pointing southwest toward Wu-sung-k'ou. An American passenger liner, the *President Jefferson*, was moored nearby. Waves beat on the ship, water droplets spattering its orange body just above the waterline. They looked like beads of sweat on a massive, hairless beast. Floating garbage collected near the surface of the water, while the gulls circled, looking for rotten food. He cursed aimlessly at the sky, and his self-pity turned into anger.

A shadow floated by. It was a silk handkerchief, dancing just beyond the railing like a white jellyfish swelling in the wind. He turned and saw a woman leaning against the railing. She wore

a black wool coat, beneath which her dress, a green-and-white-checked cheongsam, peeped out. The sun shone onto the port side of the ship from beyond the Yangtze, glinting off her hair. Her face was wet with what looked like tears. He had seen her somewhere before. She was pale, and the light shone into her eyes so that her tears glowed. He must have seen her in a movie, but which one? He couldn't stop himself from staring at her.

The bell rang for breakfast. Leng Hsiao-man wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. She glanced at the irate stranger, and as she was about to leave, she noticed a camera hanging from his long shoulder strap. The lens cover sprang open, and a finger pressed down on the shutter button. She hurried away.

The pilot boarded at 8:30 A.M. from a ladder mounted on the port side of the ship. He was responsible for navigating the ship into the narrow mouth of the Whampoa through Ch'iang-k'ou Channel. The ship would sail a little farther along the Whampoa to its destination, Kung-ho-hsiang Pier, just east of Lokatse on the northern shore of the Whampoa. He was not the only man getting ready to board the ship. At the floating pier just outside the port commissioner's office, four men in short sleeves were boarding a speedboat bound for the *Paul Lecat*—most likely gangsters, as they were carrying guns.

When the men sent by the Green Gang arrived at his cabin, Ts'ao had breakfasted and was fully dressed. Two of the bodyguards lugged his trunks out onto the deck. He reclined on the sofa in the cabin while Leng stood by the railing outside. He had no idea why Leng didn't just stay home. She insisted on traveling with him, but when she came she always had that mournful look. She shivered, went up to the trunk, opened it, and retrieved a red scarf, which she tied around her head.

The *garde municipale*, the police force of the French Concession, had been notified of Ts'ao's secret mission, but he would also need the Green Gang's protection. So instead of disembarking at Kung-ho-hsiang Pier in the International Settlement, he took a speedboat to Kin Lee Yuen Wharf, south of Lokatse. That was in the French Concession, within Green Gang territory.

Two boats were let down from the ship at the same time. One carried a Frenchman, a messenger who regularly traveled from Hanoi by train and sea via Haiphong to Shanghai, with documents that had to be personally signed for by the head of the Political Section of the French Concession Police. The other boat carried an important member of the Nanking government, his wife, his own bodyguards, and four bodyguards sent by the Green Gang. Before long, his wife started complaining of seasickness and insisted on sitting at the cabin window to get some air.

The sky was bright. Lin P'ei-wen was sitting on a rusty ladder that dipped below the waterline. The waves foamed around the pier, while bits of wood and leaves floated downstream. From where he was on Fishermen's Pier, he could see the porters on Kin Lee Yuen Wharf wearing their copper badges—only registered workers were allowed onto piers permitting overside delivery. He looked out to Lokatse, a bit of land on the eastern shore of the river that jutted out where the river took a sharp turn south. Someone said that it was called Lokatse because there used to be six families living there—*lok* meant six. But there were far more than six families there now. All the foreign trading houses were claiming land along the waterfront and building warehouses there. The few remaining rapeseed fields between dirty black walls looked like gaps in a mouth full of rotten teeth. There's no way I can keep track of all the boats rounding the corner past Lokatse, Lin thought. The papers said that the authorities were planning large-scale works to fill in deep fissures in the riverbed there.

Lin had collected a telegram in the early hours of the morning using forged identity papers. He had reported the contents of the telegram to Ku: their target, the hero of the day, would be arriving as planned. In a sense, Lin and his associates were merely the supporting cast.

In the early morning, Ku Fu-kuang had been at Mud Crossing in Pu-tung, waiting to cross the river with two other men. The Concession authorities prohibited boats other than the licensed Chinese- and Western-run ferries from taking passengers across

the river, but there were always boatmen willing to risk the passage across the narrow, winding river for a fee.

Now they were sitting in a chestnut-colored Peugeot sedan parked at the entrance to Kin Lee Yuen Wharf.

Lin saw two boats round the corner, one after another. A woman stood at the entrance to the cabin of the speedboat, the chrome-plated railing glinting in the sunlight, her red head scarf flapping in the wind. Slipping out of Fishermen's Pier from a hole in the wire-mesh fence, he went up to the Peugeot and waved.

Ko Ya-min jumped out of the car and melted into the crowd. The entrance of the wharf led out onto the crowded Quai de France. Lin immediately picked out the reporter Li Pao-i, whose shifty air gave him away.

The *Arsène Lupin* had never employed more than three people at a time. It was printed once every three days, and each paper consisted of a single broadsheet folded up into a tabloid paper, so calling Li Pao-i a newspaper reporter was a stretch. But he had somehow gotten a tip and arrived early to get a piece of the action. This was a big scoop, and he didn't have the nerve to hog it, so he had also sold the tip to a handful of more reputable newspapers whose reporters he saw regularly at the teahouse. Now they were standing next to him, while men with cameras waited about ten meters away.

Sergeant Ch'eng Yu-t'ao strode through the entrance to the wharf with several of his men from North Gate Police Station. Someone important was disembarking today. The Green Gang had undertaken to protect him, and the sergeant's job was to shoo busybodies away and seal off the floating dock connected to the jetty, so that the motorcade could drive directly up the jetty onto the dock. When the cops arrived, the Peugeot drove slowly away from the entrance to the wharf.

Ku was now standing on the southern end of Rue Takoo with a Browning No. 2 pistol tucked under his shirt, in the left pocket of his gray serge trousers. The pocket had been specially sewn on, and it was extra deep so his gun would fit snugly inside. The strange

windowless building behind him was a cold storage warehouse belonging to Shun-ch'ang Fish Traders. Ku was frantic. He realized the flaw in his plan. The jetty had been sealed off and no one was allowed to enter the floating dock. If the party had a motorcade, or if the blinds on the cars were drawn, then all was lost.

Lin P'ei-wen was standing at the opposite corner and looking toward him. Behind Ku, a narrow street called Rue de la Porte de l'Est ran south along the Quai de France, two blocks from Rue Takoo and parallel to it. On the side that intersected with the Quai de France, there was an iron gate with a police guard post. Farther south, where the French Concession ended and Chinese territory began, the road was called Waima Road, and the building on the intersection where the Quai de France became Waima Road was the headquarters of the Shanghai Special Marine Police Branch. Lin's job was to watch those two buildings closely. Ku himself was standing at the spot with the best view, and he had a clear view of the entrance to Kin Lee Yuen Wharf. The Peugeot was parked on the other end of Rue Takoo, near Rue du Whampoo.

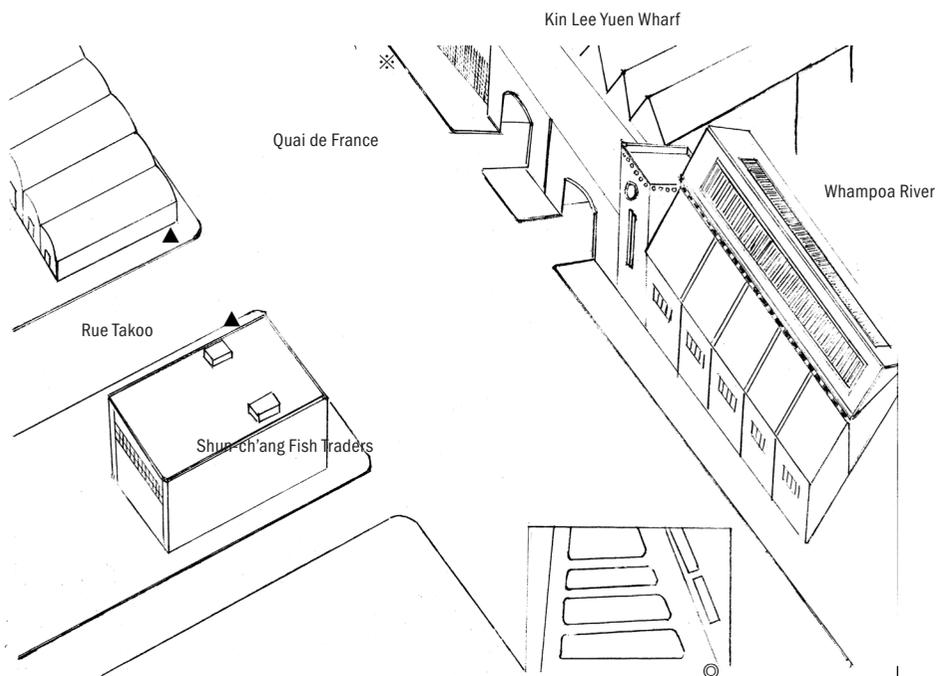
Leng had already disembarked. She too realized that things had not gone according to plan. There were three eight-cylinder Ford sedans waiting for them, and they got into the middle one, with Ts'ao sitting next to her. She did not know whether anyone could tell which car they were in, and the blinds were drawn.

She made a decision without thinking twice.

Sergeant Ch'eng Yu-t'ao was standing on the floating dock to welcome his guests. He had Ts'ao's personal bodyguards hand over their Mauser rifles. Civilians were not allowed to carry unregistered firearms in the Concession, and what mattered was that they had the Green Gang's protection.

The car drove slowly up the jetty, turning past a building toward the entrance to the wharf.

It was just past ten. Li Pao-i would claim that he had heard the clock at the Customs House chime, or at least that was what he later told Hsueh at the teahouse.



✱ : Ts'ao is assassinated here

▲ : Lin and Ku watch from here

◎ : Shanghai Special Marine Police Branch

The assassination at Kin Lee Yuen Wharf

Just then, a string of firecrackers exploded with a deafening boom behind the rickshaws lined up on the northern side of the entrance. Later, the police confirmed that a string of firecrackers had indeed been hanging on the iron fences surrounding the wharf. The ground along the wall was strewn with tiny bits of paper, and the place stank of nitrates and sulfates. The Concession Police had developed a conditioned response to firecrackers—although harmless, they had often been used in recent protests and riots to sow chaos at the scene.

A rickshaw broke out of the lineup, cutting off Leng's sedan. Its window was open. Leng rolled her window down and stuck her head out. She poked her finger down her throat, and began to throw up the milk she had had for breakfast on the ship. The car stopped abruptly, her head jerked, and vomit splattered onto the body of the car. She did not see Ko Ya-min waiting behind the rickshaw. The door to the car was yanked open, and she fell out onto the ground. The gunfire pierced her eardrums like a screwdriver.

Firecrackers were echoing all along the tall buildings on either side of the wharf. But Ku had no time to enjoy the spectacle—he was focused only on witnessing its effect. As he watched Leng fall out of the car, he thought he could imagine how she must feel.

When it was eventually decided that Ko Ya-min would be the assassin instead of Leng, no one breathed a sigh of relief for her. Leng had argued that she was every bit as brave as Ko Ya-min, and the cell believed this man, Ts'ao Chen-wu, had in all likelihood ordered the murder of her ex-husband in prison. Ts'ao had been an officer in the Kwangsi Army, and he was now head of the Military Justice Unit for the forces occupying Shanghai. But Ku chose Ko as the assassin. His priority was to make sure that Ts'ao's execution took place in public, in a highly visible location. Luckily he had not planned to have Ts'ao shot on the floating dock itself, or the police blockade of the jetty would have thwarted his plan. Ku knew why Ko Ya-min had fought so hard for this task. Wang Yang, the man who had been shot in prison on Ts'ao's orders, was not only his half-brother and mentor, but also the person who had definitively conquered Leng's heart, especially now that he was dead.

Ko reached his hand into the backseat of the car to fire. All three bullets hit Ts'ao, and the last one penetrated his temple.

For Ts'ao, that bullet was the final blow. But for Ku, it was only the first blow, the first of a series of powerful signals he planned to send to the Concession and to Shanghai.

The Concession Police stood by. Later, at a meeting to discuss the incident, they would say that everything happened too quickly for them to react.

The eight bodyguards sent by the Green Gang were also caught by surprise. They had just gotten into the other two cars in the motorcade. Just as an audience relaxes for a moment when the curtain falls and before the applause begins, they let their guard down as they settled into the car, and the assassin had seized his chance.

An investigative commission representing the Nanking government in Shanghai also began to look into the incident. In one of their internal meetings, someone suggested that there was something fishy about the fact that the police had demanded Ts'ao's bodyguards hand over their rifles. Others suggested an investigation into the Green Gang bodyguards—who else could have known when Ts'ao was due to disembark, and how was this information leaked to the assassin? But all these speculations petered out when they discovered that Ts'ao's wife had sent a telegram from Wu-sung-k'ou when the liner was anchored there. Investigations into her quickly revealed one startling piece of evidence after another: her unusual background, the telegrams she had sent to Shanghai from Hong Kong, her red head scarf, and the vomiting. The woman herself had disappeared. Her photograph appeared in all the newspapers, and the Concession tabloids made a big show of using many question marks to suggest something scurrilous had happened.

Someone brought in the form that the man who collected Leng's telegram had filled out at the Telegraph Office, but they could not identify him, and the trail went cold. The tabloid reporter called Li Pao-i was a more promising lead, but there was little Nanking could do about that. As a resident of the French Concession, the man lay within the jurisdiction of the Concession Police, and the

interrogation reports they sent to Nanking had clearly been doctored. One Sergeant Ch'eng from North Gate Police Station had written a report stating that Li had nothing to do with the assassins, and that Li had simply received an anonymous phone call at the newspaper's editorial offices, as well as a brown paper envelope that afternoon after the incident took place. But Li had connections to the Green Gang and was known for his cunning. He had tipped off several other newspapers, and sold his story and the contents of the envelope to several of the most reputable newspapers in the Concession instead of printing them in his own small paper, so he wasn't technically in breach of press regulations. No one in Nanking gave much thought to this setback, as they were already in the process of making plans to cooperate with the Concession Police.

And neither Nanking, nor the Concession Police, nor even the Green Gang could get anything out of the assassin, because after firing three shots at Ts'ao, he aimed the gun at his own temple and fired. The police coroner later found that the man had also bitten through a wax cyanide pill under his tongue. The bullet was just a safety measure.