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## *From Ho Farm to Ningsiang Town*

Being typical farm people, the Ho family were all up shortly after sunrise in spite of the night's disturbance, so Mao and I decided we should get up too. First we wrote up the events of the previous day in our diaries and I included Mao's comments on the life of Fang Pi-tung.

After we had greeted the family and eaten breakfast, Old Ho took us on a tour of the farm. Ten pigs in one sty, some black, some white and others black and white, were his most prized possessions. One enormous pig, which was white except for a jet black back, looked like a small cow. Mao asked how much it would weigh and how old it was. "I can see you're no expert," laughed Old Ho. "He weighs about a hundred sixty kilos. When a pig is two years old, we consider the meat old and not good to eat. This one is eleven months old."

"Only eleven months old?" I asked. "And already so big?"

"The size depends upon both the kind of feed they get and the breed. This is a particularly good breed. I'll probably feed him till he gets to about two hundred kilos," explained Old Ho.

Since we had never seen such fine porkers before in our lives, we wandered among the sties for quite a while and Old Ho laughed at us, saying, "Now you've got a good subject for some fine poems!" And afterwards I did actually write a short poem in my diary on "The Fat Pig."

When we walked from the pig sties to the vegetable garden, Old Ho said, "These pigs constitute the family fortune. We couldn't live without the pigs. They cover all our expenses in such things as meat, oil, tea, salt, and so forth, for the whole year, and often a good margin of profit besides. No, we couldn't live without our pigs." Mao and I really understood the importance of these animals to the Hunan farmers. That province is the most important pork producing section of China and at that time, it supplied much of the meat for export.

The extensive kitchen garden was full of excellent vegetables; we especially admired its clean appearance and the complete lack of

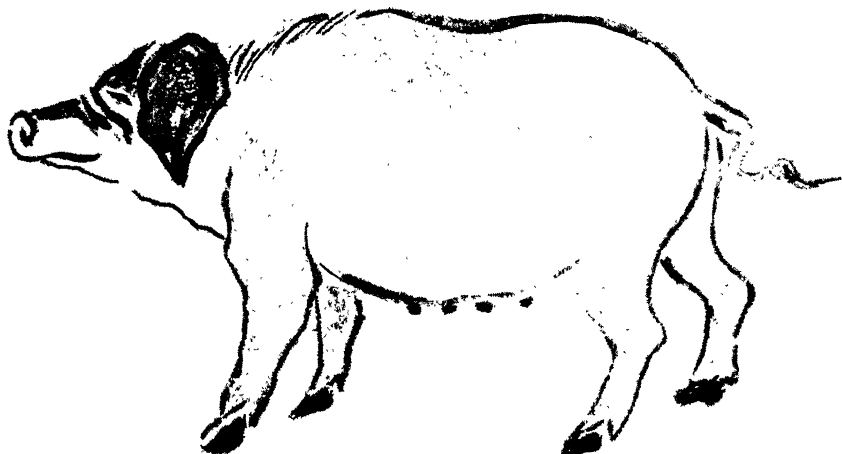
weeds. When I mentioned this to Old Ho, he was very pleased and tried to reply in a classical literary simile, "The weeds are like low, evil-minded individuals and they must all be got rid of because they are a bad influence on the refined and noble vegetables, the 'gentlemen,' the 'sages!'"

Ho Hu-tzu laughed heartily, "What do you think of Father's classical composition? Not bad, eh? Like father like son!"

Finally we visited the rice fields which were still covered with water, but from which the healthy young plants emerged. Old Ho's second son was working in the field and we were told that the rice would be ready for harvest in two months and this crop would be sufficient to supply the requirements of the family for the whole year. With their pigs, vegetables and rice, they were practically self-sustaining. They had to plant hemp for spinning and they were buying raw cotton.

Ho Hu-tzu, the oldest son, had a good education and was a teacher. His was called a "half-plough, half-study" family. Mao's family as well as mine were in this same category.

For lunch, we had quite a feast: fresh water fish had been netted from the pond, chickens had been killed, and an assortment of tasty smoked meat had been brought out for the occasion. With the



wonderful assortment of delicious vegetables from the garden, there were more than ten different dishes, each with its own special, individual taste. Both Mao and I cried out in protest when we saw the sumptuous feast that had been prepared, "You should not have gone to so much trouble. Remember we are living the life of beggars!"

Ho Hu-tzu was about to speak, but his father interrupted him, "You are both scholars and Shu-heng's good friends. Now you are our honored guests. How can you say you are beggars!"

Old Ho was quite incapable of understanding our desire to live as beggars, and he really felt honored to have us as guests in his home. Though he did not understand us, we understood him and we were careful to make no further mention of "beggars," since the idea was so distasteful to him. From then on we played the role of honored guests.

Since this role did not fit our plan, we thanked our host profusely after the meal and said we must be getting on our way. Old Ho was crestfallen. "But how is this?" he asked. "You walk so far to visit us and after just one meal you want to go. I thought you would stay for a week at least. I have killed a pig and so much food has been prepared and now you talk of going. You have hardly tasted our food. Please stay a little longer. This afternoon I shall take you up into the hills to see our woods."

When we saw how deeply offended he would be if we insisted, we agreed to remain for one day longer as honorable guests. Later we quietly urged Ho Hu-tzu to persuade his father not to ask us to stay longer.

After tea Old Ho took us to see his forest, from which they gathered their firewood. Though most of the trees were pine, we saw many of species that were unfamiliar to us. One hill side was covered with bamboo which supplied the delicate young shoots in the spring for eating and canes for making many household articles. From the top of the low hill we had a fine view of the broad plain stretching away into the distance and the four of us sat down under a pine to admire the scene. Up there where it was pleasantly cool and fresh, Old Ho told about his early struggles to make ends meet. Ho Hu-tzu listened quietly and at mention of certain sad episodes he was so moved that tears welled up into his eyes.

Supper was another sumptuous banquet with a variety of rich plates which made us feel uneasy. This was hardly a good preparation for the life of austerity we had before us! Before we left the table, we announced that we would leave early the next morning. Old Ho was downcast, but said nothing. After we had chatted for a while, we all went to bed.

Next morning after we had eaten breakfast and thanked them all again, we said goodbye. Ho Hu-tzu walked with us for a long way and tried to persuade us to take some money just in case we needed something, but we firmly refused and asked him not to worry. Now we would beg but there was no fear of starving. "You're strange fellows," he remarked unconvinced. "You probably won't die of hunger, but do take care of yourselves." His offer of money reminded us of the money Liu had given us and we asked Ho Hu-tzu to accept it. Since he refused, we put it in our bundles and tried to forget it.

Leaving our friend, we hastened to get back on the wide road which would take us to Ningsiang Town. On the way we talked contentedly of the Ho family and how happy and secure they were. There were numerous such farm families in China at that time.

Toward mid-day when we were hungry, we decided not to stop at roadside eating places. When we came to a large house, we walked resolutely through the gate and into the courtyard. We had armed ourselves with a couple of heavy sticks, but there were no howling dogs, so we knocked at the door. Telling her we were beggars, we asked for rice. Without comment she returned to the house and presently brought us each a small bowl of cold rice without vegetables. Because we were very hungry, we ate quickly and would have asked for more, but she said, "That's the portion we always give to beggars. Isn't it enough?" When Mao told her we would not be begging if we were not hungry, she suggested that we try another house.

Begging for one's food, we realized, was very different from ordering a meal in a restaurant where one could eat his fill, if he had the money to pay for it. A beggar must be content with meager rations and often was obliged to beg from many different homes before his hunger was satisfied. In these country districts the houses were widely scattered, sometimes one or two kilometers apart.

At the next house we did not get a good reception. The master

said, "We have no cooked rice. I can give you a little dry grain." That would do us no good; so we walked on.

At the third house, the people were more generous. They gave us a big bowl of cold rice and vegetables which fully satisfied our hunger, even though the food was coarse and hard.

In the district town of Ningsiang we had school friends, but we decided not to visit them lest we have an experience similar to the Ho family and our beggar-life would lose its value if we had such interludes of easy living. In the town itself there was nothing of special interest. On the outskirts there was a broad river called Deep Jade Water, spanned by a picturesque bridge near which were clustered many little boats. In the distance arose a low hill called Shih Ku Shan, Lion Strength Mountain, on the slopes of which grew lovely pines.

Mao and I sat on the bank looking into the deep jade water and admiring the landscape. We wrote a little poem which I found quite pleasing at the time:

*Clouds enfold Lion Strength Mountain,  
The bridge locks in the boats of the Deep Jade Water.*

