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Our Long Talk in Changsha

In the winter of 1920 I returned from Paris to Peking. Mao Tse-tung had already been back in Changsha a long time. And, although we wrote to each other frequently, it was not until March of 1921 that I was able to go to Changsha to see him. He was Director of the Primary Section of the First Normal School, but most of his activities were secretly directed toward the organization of the CY (Communist Youth).

From March to July we spent most of our free time discussing the Socialist revolution, but the more we talked, the further apart we seemed to grow. However, the same spirit of intimate friendship characterized our relations and we sincerely tried to understand each other's point of view.

Mao's lack of interest in the old Hsin Min Study Association was significant. It was not a political organization and though the members had not studied Socialism or other political systems, many of them attended secret meetings of the CY, and they began to believe blindly all that was told them there. The birth of the CY entailed the death of the Hsin Min Study Association. When I arrived in Changsha, I had the impression that I had been invited to attend its funeral service.

Nevertheless the members welcomed me warmly and, when I had many intimate talks with numerous members, it was quite obvious that Mao did not like it. He was afraid that some of them might be influenced by my ideas and as a result they might lose their present blind faith in Communism as inculcated by CY. I found that he quietly asked older members to persuade me to return to France and he even suggested the same to me himself! He knew I was to return to Paris and he was anxious for me to leave as soon as possible. His great hope, however, was that I accept his faith in Russian Communism and collaborate with him in spreading this doctrine throughout China, and put it into practice.(34)

In Changsha was a large building called the Ch'uan Shan Study Institute, so named in honor of a scholar called Wang Ch'uan Shan

(1619–1692). A group of fifty or more converts to Communism had taken over this building, and since Mao Tse-tung was a member, I was invited to live there. The enthusiasm of this group was probably due to the hope that age and experience would secure them posts of leadership if the Communists came into power.

Since one of the main purposes of my return to China was to arrange for the establishment of Franco-Chinese Institutes in Lyon and in Charleroi, Belgium, I was interviewed by reporters of the leading newspaper, *Shih Shih Hsin Pao* (*Current Affairs*) as soon as I arrived in Shanghai and my remarks were printed on the first page. Naturally the article was read by our old friends in Changsha and when I visited the city, they came to talk with me about the plan. Mao was quick to take advantage of the atmosphere of enthusiasm in order to group them together for his own purposes, and he and I introduced a proposition that the Ch'uan Shan Study Institute be converted into a "self-study" university. All agreed and I was asked to be chief organizer.

To me the "self-study" university plan has always seemed an ideal system because it emphasizes free study and resembles the old-time Academy of China without fixed hours for work and with no teachers. Only abundant reference books and a good laboratory are necessary, and also someone to arrange meetings and discussions among the students. I gave some talks about the system and aroused enthusiasm. I consulted with intellectual and educational circles in Peking and Shanghai about the system and received some favorable comments. The Rector of Peking University, Ts'ai Yüan-p'ei, and Chang T'ai-yen, the leading Chinese language scholar, wrote long essays in their own beautiful handwriting expressing their approval of the plan. I also received a long letter from Wu Chih-hui, a famous savant and reformer, one of the founders of the Chinese Republic, analyzing the possibilities of the self-study system. I had these manuscripts bound into a book, but they were left behind in China and I have no idea who has them now. Soon afterwards I returned to Paris and the Changsha Self-study University remained a dream.

After my preliminary discussions with Mao Tse-tung, I considered trying to revive the Hsin Min Study Association, but Mao and I found it impossible to agree.

Discussing the problem with Ho Hu-tzu, he told me, "Siao Hu-tzu,

if you stay in Changsha and don't return to France, the old Hsin Min Study Association members will rally around you, but if you are not here, they will inevitably follow Jun-chih (Mao). It's like that with me, also!"

My old friend, Ch'en Chang spoke in similar manner, "All our friends," he said, "have secretly become members of CY and it would be very difficult to bring them back. You know that the Association aimed at reforming China in a sort of abstract way. It had no political views and no fixed plan of action. They now think the only way to attain practical results is to follow Russia's lead and to go all out to propagate the Russian doctrine. No one is looking for any other way to bring about the reforms. Why? First, because they have Russia's model to follow. Second, by playing up to Russia they hope to get economic support as well as help in other ways. Third, everyone is enthusiastic about the secret movement. The very mystery of the secret meetings proves an attraction and I doubt if anything would induce them to turn back. I know that you have your own 'anarchistic' ideas of freedom, but everyone could not be expected to agree with Communism. I think you and Mao Jun-chih will walk different roads in the future, but both of you will remain my very good friends. Personally, I think it is good for people to differ. There are many aspects of truth, and they are all precious."

When I told Mao what Ch'en Chang had said, he commented, "It's quite true! Many people are not satisfied with the present situation. If we want to bring about reforms, we must have a revolution! If we want the revolution to be successful, the best thing we can do is to learn from Russia! Russian Communism is the most suitable system for us and the easiest to follow. There is only one road for us to walk and I hope sincerely that you will walk this road with us."