

Hunan, Land of Heroes and Brigands

Mao Tse-tung and I were both born in the province of Hunan, a land notorious for its heroes and brigands. There used to be a popular expression in China, and even the Chinese colonies in foreign lands, that "China can be conquered only when all the people of Hunan are dead."

More than two thousand years ago Hunan Province was a very strong country. At that time it was called Ch'u, and its traditional enemy was the neighboring country of Ch'in. A second popular expression, dating from that era, which has survived to the present day, is: "If only three Ch'u families are left alive, they will still be able to conquer Ch'in!" Siang is a third alternative name for Hunan, since the names of provinces varied with the dynasties, and in the year 1864, the Siang army destroyed the Taiping rebel forces which were threatening to overthrow the Ch'ing Dynasty, and thus gained great renown for this feat of arms.

Right on the northern boundary lies Lake Tungting, eight hundred *li* in circumference and connected with the nearby Yangtze Kiang (*kiang*: river) by numerous channels. The lake is fed by four big rivers named Siang, Li, Yüan and Tzu, which rise in the southern mountains and flow roughly parallel to each other from south to north, dividing the country into segments. The largest of these watercourses is the Siang Kiang, whence comes the old name of the province just mentioned.

The present name Hunan is a combination of the two words *hu*

(lake) and *nan* (south). Since the province lies south of Lake Tungting, the origin is quite clear. Hunan is located in Central China and, according to the official census of 1947, it has a population of 26,171,117. It consists of 77 districts, governed from the provincial capital, Changsha, and covers a total area of 204,771 square kilometers (79,062 square miles).

The mountainous character of this land, interlaced by its four mighty rivers, makes the Hunan landscape rugged, awe-inspiring, and extremely picturesque. The talented Chu Yüan (343–290 B.C.) was born here and his famous lyric poem, *Li Sao*, was a lament of the treatment he received at the court from jealous fellow officials and the easily influenced king. Finally realizing he would never be able to carry out his idealistic projects of reforming the country, he threw himself in the Mi-lo Kiang and the anniversary of his drowning is commemorated throughout China to this day, on the fifth day of the fifth moon, by what is now known in the West as the Dragon Boat Festival. The original ceremony of casting rice wrapped in bamboo leaves into the water has been transformed into the eating of sweetened rice from bamboo-leaf packets and water races in the dragon-decorated boats.

However, apart from providing inspiration for her poets and painters, these rugged mountains from time immemorial supplied excellent cover for the numerous bandit gangs which thrive here. In fact, there have always been so many bandits that *Ch'un tao ju mao* is a common saying, which means, "The bandits are as thick as the hairs on your head." Indeed, Hunan came under the influence of culture and learning very much later than other regions which were directly influenced by the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius, such as the Hwang Ho basin. It is interesting to remember that the Miao savages who dominated this area some three thousand years ago are the progenitors of the small groups of picturesque semilegendary tribes who today live in caves in the remote mountains, shunning all contact with the outside world.

The natives of Hunan, even the classically modest scholars, are still fond of boasting, *Iao tze pu pa hsieh!* which is, "Me? I'm not afraid of the Devil himself!" The Hunan people are distinguished throughout China for their inflexibility and their courage.

August 19, 1911, marks the first step in the fateful revolt against the Manchu rulers who had governed China since 1644. The outbreak, which occurred in Hupeh, was at first weak and isolated. But less than a fortnight later, on September 1, Hunan joined in after killing the General and a number of high Imperial officials and the revolution was firmly established.

Shanghai cargo boats of three to five thousand tons can navigate the Siang Kiang and there has always been a big export trade, chiefly in pork and bristle, with Europe. The Hunan pigs, fed on rice, are very famous for their delicious flavor.

In this strange land of Hunan, the locally grown peppercorns, which are pungent in the extreme, have become such a staple article of the people's diet that the little children begin eating them almost as soon as they learn to walk. Perhaps this pungent peppercorn may be regarded as symbolic of the vigorous, forceful character of its consumers. After becoming accustomed to this variety, there is no peppercorn in the whole world too strong for Mao Tse-tung and me, sons of the land of heroes and brigands.

In the heart of this land of hot peppercorns and savory pork, about two hours' steamboat journey from the capital, Changsha, there is a district named Siangtan. About forty or fifty kilometers beyond this, in the region called Yin Tien Shih, the traveler comes to a high mountain, with a lower one just beyond, and then another high mountain beyond that. There lies the valley of Shao Shan, not far from my old home. The mountains and hills in Yin Tien Shih have been compared with the exquisite petals of a lotus which combine to form the beautiful flower. On one of these petals a small human being was to be born on the nineteenth of November 1893 and here he was to pass his youth. The name by which this youth would be known to the world was Mao Tse-tung.(1)