Mao Tse-tung's father owned a small piece of land in Shao Shan, dedicated primarily to the growing of rice.(2) The family, who planted and cultivated the fields and then harvested the crop, lived very simply in their small house on the hillside. Both father and son were very stubborn, always quarreling, and never succeeding in coming to an agreement on any subject.(3)

Father Mao sent his eldest son to the small country school where the boy learned a few Chinese characters and was taught how to count. The father never intended his son to receive any more advanced education because he was needed to help on the farm, and they were much too poor at that time to hire a laborer. However, when the son had mastered characters sufficient to read simple stories, he came into possession of a novel which he was able to understand to some extent. Very few books were available in the small village where he lived and it happened that the most popularly read were two novels, the Shui Hu, and the San Kuo Chih Yen I. The first recounts the adventures of one hundred and eight brigands who had banded together; the second relates the tale of the wars between the Three Kingdoms. Mao Tse-tung became passionately fond of these two books and devoted every possible moment which he could spare from his work on the farm to reading them.

Meanwhile, Mao grew very tall and strong. When he reached the age of fourteen or fifteen, he was already as tall and as big as his father. He could carry on his broad shoulders two of the heavy manure baskets which had to be taken to the fields several times each day. His father was very happy to have such an efficient helper in his son, but Mao Tse-tung's thoughts were elsewhere. He would take his books with him to the fields every day, and whenever opportunity arose, he would steal away to his favorite hiding place under a tree behind an ancient tomb. Frequently he arrived at a state bordering on ecstasy as he followed, word by word, the lives and adventures of the great

bandits, or read of the schemings and the stratagems in the wars of the Three Kingdoms.

His father, whose life was completely wrapped up in the daily routine of the work on the farm, began to notice his son's frequent absences and to worry about the farm work which remained undone. (4) Finally one fine day he caught Mao Tse-tung red-handed, sitting behind the tomb with a novel in his hand and the two empty manure baskets beside him. The father was furious.

"So you have decided to stop work, have you?" he asked.

"No, Father, I am only having a little rest," his son replied.

"But you have not carried any manure at all this whole morning!"

"Oh yes, I have. I have carried several baskets since dawn." Mao Tse-tung was referring to the big manure baskets, two of which are carried together, slung one at each end of a pole, and supported like a yoke on the shoulders.

"How many?"

"Five or six at least since dawn."

"Only five or six in half a day? And do you think that is enough to earn your living?"

"Well, and how many do you think you could carry in half a day?"
"Twenty! Or at least fifteen."

"But from the house to the field is a very long way."

"I suppose you think I should build the house right on the edge of the field to make your work lighter! Didn't I have to do just the same when I was a boy your age? It seems you no longer care what happens to your family. How do you think we're going to live? There you sit quite calmly as if you had not a care in the world! Have you no sense of gratitude? What good can it possibly do to waste your time reading those stupid books? You are not a child any more and if you want to eat, you must work!"

"Oh, hush. That's enough. You are always complaining," Mao Tsetung replied.

After this scene, they went back to the house for lunch. About five o'clock, the son Mao disappeared again. This time his father found him easily. He went straight to the old tomb and the sight which had so aroused his wrath in the morning again met his gaze. There his son sat with his book in his hands and the empty baskets beside him.

The quarrel which had been interrupted in the morning began again:

"Has your mind been so completely turned by those bad books that you no longer pay any attention to what your father says to you?"

"No, Father. I do listen to you. I do everything you tell me to do."

"You know very well what I want. I want you to give your mind to the farm and to work regularly in the fields, and to read no more of these bad books."

"I will work regularly on the farm; but I want to read my books as well. I promise you I will work first in the fields and then I will read afterwards. When I have finished my work in the fields, I am free, am I not? Then you can't complain and scold. If I do my share of the work in the fields, you have no right to stop me from reading my books when my tasks are finished."

"But, my son, you carry just a few baskets and then you come and hide here to read."

"Before I came here to read, I did all that you asked," Mao Tse-tung replied quietly.

"And what was that?" the father demanded.

"After lunch, I have carried fifteen baskets of manure. If you doubt my word, you may go to the field and count them for yourself. Then you may come back here. But please leave me in peace now. I want to read."

His father gazed at Mao Tse-tung in open-mouthed amazement. Fifteen baskets represented really heavy work for half a day, and if his son spoke the truth, he certainly could find no cause for complaint. Baffled and sorrowful at this unusual son of his, he plodded his way to the field where the family was working and counted exactly fifteen baskets.

From that day, Mao Tse-tung read his beloved warrior and bandit novels in peace in his secret hiding place, after he had accomplished the work that his father had demanded.(5)