

Mao Tse-tung's Struggle for Learning

Painfully pursuing the two old novels taught Mao Tse-tung many new word characters, and he discovered that he was experiencing much less difficulty with his reading. Thinking these things over while he did the daily tasks which he hated, he dreamed of himself studying in one of the lovely new modern schools where he could get more of this coveted book learning.(6) He nourished this fascinating picture quietly and secretly in his mind. Was it really as fantastic as it seemed? The more he dreamed and thought of it the less ridiculous and impossible it appeared. Gradually it became an obsession and he began planning and scheming.

The Ch'ing Dynasty was drawing to a close.(7) And the school system in China had gradually been reformed along more Western lines. The new "foreign schools," as they were called by the people, had sprung up everywhere, and it was to one of these that Mao Tse-tung dreamed of going. He had made up his mind to become a "foreign student." The very name appealed to his romantic imagination.

He did not dare to approach his father directly, but the idea preyed on his mind and obsessed his thoughts to such an extent that one day, without even realizing it, he let out his secret: He wanted to go to a big city and study in a "foreign school." His father regarded him in astonishment and dismay for a while, and then commented, "You want to go away to school? What imagination! What a ridiculous idea! Just use your common sense for a moment. What school could you attend? A primary school? How can a full grown man study with little children? A secondary school? But you cannot go to a secondary school without going first to a primary school. The whole idea is completely mad!"

"I want to go to a primary school," Mao answered. For reply, his father gave a loud and raucous laugh, as if to close the matter to any further consideration.

After this laugh, father and son did not speak to each other for a long time. But Mao Tse-tung spent more and more time in his private

"reading room" behind the old tomb. His silence did not signify, as his father seemed to think, that he had resigned himself to spending the rest of his life in work on the family farm. On the contrary, the episode had served to crystallize his ideas and had enabled him to make a firm decision. The farm work which he had previously performed with a certain willingness now became abhorrent drudgery, and he thought of nothing but the day when he would leave it all behind him to go forth to the big city. He constantly turned the project over and over in his mind, wondering just how he would be able to make it a reality, but never for a moment doubting that it could be done. His father, meanwhile, was secretly congratulating himself on having so easily prevailed upon his son to listen to reason.(8)

Finally Mao Tse-tung completed his plan of action and decided to take the first practical step toward the freedom he was seeking. He went to visit several relatives and friends of the family and asked each one to lend him a bit of money without saying anything to his father. His scheme met with a certain amount of success.

With the money in his pocket, Mao gained greater strength and confidence, so that he felt certain that he could convince his father to agree to his plan to go and study in the city. One evening, while all the family was eating dinner, he suddenly, without preamble, declared, "I have decided to study in the Tungshan Primary School." His father, shocked and surprised, regarded him angrily but said not a word; so Mao continued, "In three days, I shall leave and go to the Primary School."

"Do you mean what you are saying?" asked the father incredulously.

"Certainly I mean it," replied Mao.

"Have you been granted a scholarship that you can go to school without paying? Or perhaps you have won a lottery ticket this morning and have suddenly become rich," scoffed his father.

"Don't you worry about the money. I shall not ask you to pay even a penny; and that is all I am going to say."

His father slowly got up and left the table to smoke his long Chinese pipe while he considered this new turn of events. Five minutes later, he returned and, while Mao and the rest of the family regarded him in silence, he asked, "Do you have a scholarship? How can you go to

the Tungshan School without my having to pay? I know very well that when one goes to school, he has to pay for the lessons and also for his board and lodging. All this is very expensive. Little Wang has been wanting to go to school now for several years, but he has never been able to go. Unfortunately, primary schools are not free. They are only for the rich people, not for the poor such as you, I am sorry to say."

Mao smiled disdainfully as he replied, "Don't worry about all that, you will have to pay nothing. That is all."

"No," said his father with a sad voice, "that is not all. If you leave home, I shall be a laborer short. Who will help me work in the fields when you are gone? You tell me I will have nothing to pay, but you forget I shall have to pay another laborer to take your place. You know, my son, I cannot afford to do that."

Mao Tse-tung had not thought about that aspect of the problem, and he did not know how to reply. He realized that his father's contention was reasonable and true. What could he do now? It was always a question of money, and he felt very despondent. Also, he was angry and embarrassed because it seemed his father had outwitted him at the last moment. He needed time to think of a solution.

Finally he thought of Mr. Wang Chi-fan, a family relative, who, Mao had heard, liked to encourage and help ambitious youngsters to gain an education. Mao told Mr. Wang of his ambitions and his difficulties and asked him to lend him some money. Impressed by the youth's earnestness and determination, Mr. Wang agreed to comply with his request.*

When Mao returned home, he again started talking about the big city. His father sadly repeated that he could not let him go because he needed a laborer to help him on the farm. "How much would a laborer cost?" asked Mao.

"At least a dollar a month," replied his father. "That would be twelve dollars a year."

Mao Tse-tung quietly handed a package to his father and said, "Here are the twelve dollars. I shall leave for Tungshan tomorrow morning!"(9)

* Mr. Wang Chi-fan is one of the outstanding intellectuals of the present day and is a Director of Changsha College. The author retains very pleasant memories of his friendship.