University? Just what should one do?"

"No," replied Tan, "it is not necessary to study to get into power. Did the rulers of the Ch’in dynasty study, for instance Emperor Shih Huang (246–210 B.C.) or the Empress Han Wu (140–88 B.C.)? Wasn’t Genghis Khan (1277–1294) a common soldier? All of us really know a lot more right now than any of them did. To become President you don’t have to be a scholar. Politics is a different matter altogether!"

"Well, what does one do then to get political power?" asked Mao.

"Politicians must fight," replied Tan. "A politician must attack fearlessly anyone who attacks or opposes him. Other men also want to become President and he must overcome them. He must fight all who stand in his way and he must win at whatever cost. Sometimes it may be necessary to kill and to become a merciless assassin!"

"But in politics, how does one attack one’s adversaries?" asked Mao.

"That is a very important question, Mao," answered Tan. "You can’t attack them with your two bare hands. It is necessary for you to have many loyal partisans who march to victory with you and who are willing to work for you. You have to gather these partisans together. In a word, you have to organize a political party!"

Mao Tse-tung took in all this information greedily and very frankly expressed his admiration for Tan’s great wisdom.

8

Back to School

During the first year of the Republic, 1912, the city of Changsha founded a Fourth Normal School, with Mr. Chen Jun-lin as Director. Mr. Chen was a well-known educator, who also operated a private school, the Ch’u Yi. We became fast friends and about three years later he invited me to accept a position as senior master in the Ch’u Yi private school.

When Mao Tse-tung entered the Fourth Normal, his first teacher was Chen Jun-lin. Among the many deans in this college was one
named Wang Chi-fan, a friend of mine who used to loan money to Mao.

The Fourth Normal had been in existence for only a few months when the Hunan government decided to amalgamate it with the First Normal, where I was a student. One morning I saw all the furniture and movable equipment arrive for installation in our school, and the combined schools became the First Normal. Mr. Wang Chi-fan, the dean, was also transferred together with the students, who numbered about two hundred. First Normal had previously had about a thousand students, but now the combined registration made it the largest school in Changsha.

The students from Fourth Normal were not as well dressed as First Normal, since we all wore uniforms. Their clothes differed in both type and color, and they looked like raw army recruits. One of these “recruits” was a tall, clumsy, dirtily dressed young man whose shoes badly needed repairing. This young man was Mao Tse-tung.(18)

Mao was not unusual in appearance, as some people have maintained, with his hair growing low on his forehead, like the devils pictured by old-time artists, nor did he have any especially striking features. In fact I have never observed anything unusual in his physical appearance. To me he always seemed quite an ordinary, normal-looking person. His face was rather large, but his eyes were neither large nor penetrating, nor had they the sly, cunning look sometimes attributed to them. His nose was flattish and of a typical Chinese shape. His ears were well proportioned; his mouth, quite small; his teeth very white and even. These good white teeth helped to make his smile quite charming, so that no one would imagine that he was not genuinely sincere. He walked rather slowly, with his legs somewhat separated, in a way that reminded one of a duck waddling. His movements in sitting or standing were very slow. Also, he spoke slowly and he was by no means a gifted speaker.

From the first day, I knew that he was Mao Tse-tung and he knew that I was Siao Shu-tung, which was my school name, since we were distant neighbors in the country region from which we both came. Our homes were approximately thirty kilometers apart, and we lived in neighboring districts. I came from Siangsiang, and he lived across the border in Siangtan.
Though we knew each other by sight, we had never spoken except for an occasional smile or a short greeting when we met in the school corridors or on the school grounds. At that time, since I was a senior student, he did not dare to speak first to me; and I knew nothing of his personality nor his ideas. As my studies kept me very busy, I had neither time nor desire to form trivial friendships with those in lower classes.

Later, however, an incident occurred which increased our acquaintance considerably. It took place in the schoolroom where the best essays were exhibited. Each student in the fifteen or twenty classes in the school was required to write an essay once a week. The best from each class was handed to a teachers' committee which chose three, four, or five to be hung in the glass-covered exhibition cases in the large display room, for all the students to read as models. Often my essays were thus honored, and Mao became my most enthusiastic reader. His essays were also selected on several occasions and I read them with interest. Thus I became acquainted with his ideas, but what impressed me most at that time was his awkward style of handwriting. With his clumsy brush strokes, he never managed to keep quite within the lines of the squared paper, and from a distance his characters often looked like haphazard arrangements of straws. Finally he spoke to me, with a smile of apology, "You can write two words in one small square while I need three small squares for two words." What he said was quite true.

From reading the essays, we learned of each other's ideas and opinions, and thus a bond of sympathy formed between us.

Of course Mao knew all that time that I was the top student in the school and I knew that, according to prevalent criteria, he was not too bad himself. Every morning I used to hear him reading aloud from the old classics and I know he studied hard. But of all the subjects in the curriculum, only his essay-writing was good. He received no marks at all for English, only five out of a hundred for arithmetic, and in drawing the only thing he managed was a circle. In these subjects he was always among the bottom few in the class. But at that time, essay-writing was considered all-important. If the essay was good, then the student was good. So Mao was a good student!(19)

Several months after our brief exchange in the display room, we met
one morning in one of the corridors. We were both walking slowly, since we were not going to class, and Mao stopped in front of me with a smile, "Mr. Siao." At that time everyone in the school addressed his fellow students in English.

"Mr. Mao," I replied, returning the greeting and wondering vaguely what he was about to say, since this was practically the first time we had really spoken to each other.

"What is the number of your study?"

"I am in study number one," I replied. Naturally he knew this quite well and the question was merely an excuse to start conversation.

"This afternoon, after class, I'd like to come to your study to look at your essays, if you don't mind," he asked.

"Of course I shall be pleased to see you," I replied, because it was customary for good friends to ask to read each other's essays, and his gesture implied both admiration and respect for the writer. Mao Tsetung's request was at the same time a manner of offering me his friendship, which I accepted. I did not, however, ask to see his work, for that would have been considered most unusual on the part of a senior student.

Classes finished for the day at four o'clock and Mao arrived at my study within the hour. My friends had all gone out for a walk; so I was left alone waiting for his visit. During our first talk, no mention was made of our home country, and we confined our conversation to a discussion of the organization, curriculum, and teachers of the school, stating frankly our opinions of the merits of each. We agreed on gymnastics in which subject we had four teachers, one of whom specialized in military drill, another in dancing. But we did not like them and we found it difficult to show any respect. They were too smartly dressed for teachers, and we suspected their moral standards were not what they should have been. In the mornings they often missed classes because they had stayed up too late at night playing cards; so they could not waken.

Mao and I enjoyed our first talk. Finally he said, "Tomorrow I would like to come and ask your guidance." He took two of my essays, made a formal bow, and departed. He was very polite. Each time he came to see me he made a bow.