In less than half a century after the birth of the Republic of China, two men had conceived plans to overthrow it, and both were successful in carrying out their individual schemes. Strangely enough, both men came from the same district of Hunan Province, Siangtan. One of these was Yang Tu, the other Mao Tse-tung.

Though these men did not know each other, I knew both of them. Fundamentally they were very different in their manner of thinking, though there were certain points of resemblance, and in relating the story of Mao Tse-tung's youth, mention should be made of Yang Tu.

Yang was almost twenty years older than Mao. He belonged to the previous generation, and in later years, it was his political ambition to be able to influence to some extent his fellow Siangtanite, Mao Tse-tung. No doubt neither sympathized with the other's ideas, but that is not a part of this story.

I remember when I was a very young lad, hearing people in the Tutor School say, "This Yang Tu is a man of exceptional talent." But at that time I did not know what they meant. That was when he achieved second place in the notoriously difficult Imperial Examinations, attaining thereby the highest educational honor possible under the old system. His reputation was well known and much talked about throughout the country.

Though the Chinese Republic was established in 1912, internally the country was very unstable, and Yang Tu maintained that until education became more general, it was impossible to practice successfully a democratic republican form of government. He believed that the masses had to be educated in order to be able to govern themselves, and in the meantime, that the republic should be changed to a limited monarchy system like those in England and Germany at that time.

In 1913, he started to put his ideas into action. First, he brought together five well-known public figures in Peking to form an association which they gave the name Ch'ou An Hui, "Stabilization of the Country." This group proclaimed the President, Yüan Shih-k'ai, to be
Emperor. Yüan Shih-k'ai himself was, of course, quite agreeable to the change and the plan found quite wide acceptance. The establishment of the republic was thus followed within four years by a return to the monarchy, the name given to the new system being translated as “the first year of the New Era.” Yang Tu became the Emperor’s Prime Minister.

Many high ranking army officials, however, did not approve of the change in government, and just eighty-three days after he was put on the throne as Emperor, Yüan Shih-k'ai was overthrown by a popular revolt, organized by this army nucleus. A republic was once more proclaimed and Yüan Shih-k'ai, it is said, died of a broken heart.

Though Yang Tu’s political activities had seemingly ended in failure, he lost none of his political ambition. At that time Mao Tse-tung and I were still students in First Normal and we followed these events in the newspapers day by day with keen interest, discussing what was taking place and endeavoring to forecast what the future might hold in store. Our attitudes were, however, fundamentally quite different: Mao was very excited and enthusiastic about Yang Tu and his political action, while I was inclined to be rather cynical and impatient with his political scheming. I really considered Yang Tu a rather despicable person, completely lacking in personal pride, integrity, and dignity, and as for Yüan Shih-k'ai, I felt that he had shown clearly in a number of ways that he was not worthy of the name of Emperor.

After Yüan Shih-k'ai’s untimely death, many people, following the Chinese custom, composed memorial couplets for him. For Yang Tu, even with his high educational honors, the task was not easy; but everyone looked to him for the official memorial couplets, since he had been Prime Minister and people felt that he was most capable of composing a fitting memorial. The first part of his couplet (tui tzu) said: “The republican government was bad for China, but China has been unjust to the republican form of government; this will be seen clearly a hundred years from now.” The second half ran: “Your Majesty owed a debt to monarchy, but monarchy owes nothing to you; from your place in the other world, you must agree with this.” Later he wrote two short poems on his fan which, translated literally, reads as follows:
With success you become an emperor or king,
With failure you remain a common man.
But in the end, the grave claims all alike.
I exchange my post of counselor to the Emperor
For retirement to fish peacefully on the Five Lakes,
As did Fang Li.

To serve a master with whom one has an intimate acquaintance
Is a difficult task.

Wang Man and Chang Liang died unhappy
After dedicating their lives to their Emperor Masters.
The will of Heaven will decree further troubles for the country.
But I am no longer to be a Kung Ming.*

In 1926, the army chief, Chang Tso-lin, formed a government in Peking and proclaimed himself Marshal. It was proposed that Yang Tu should be Minister of Education and he asked me to help him. At that time, I was a revolutionary who lived in constant fear of arrest by Chang Tso-lin's secret police; so I acceded to his request with pleasure, since I was thus assured of protection in case of need. Yang Tu and I had many long talks on the subject of Communism, which Chang Tso-lin was attempting to stamp out unmercifully. In fact, anyone even suspected of being an active member of the movement, who fell into his hands, was summarily shot. At that time, the Communist leader was the director of the Peking University Library and a good friend of mine. Later, he was strangled on orders from Chang. Many quite innocent people were killed during this period because they were suspected of being in sympathy with the radicals and Communists. Mao himself was in hiding and I was without news of him.

One day when Yang Tu and I were talking, he warned me of possible danger, and the following conversation took place: "Tzu-cheng," he said, "you had better be careful. People are saying that you have Communist tendencies and in some quarters it is being suggested that you are a Communist spy."

"How strange," I answered, "why should they suspect me?"

"Because your talk is inclined to be radical and in the university, it

* Kung Ming was the famous Prime Minister under Liu Pei.
is said, you often favored the Communist students. However, the most important reason is that you are Mao Tse-tung's best friend and you have often been heard to say that he has his good points. It would almost seem at times that you are campaigning for him," warned Yang Tu.

"It is true that I was Mao Tse-tung's best friend, but I never became a Communist."

"But, my friend, how can you be such a good friend of his? I have heard that he has no sentiments whatever!"

"We were schoolmates," I explained, "and he seemed to have been attracted to me. We got to enjoy the discussions we used to have and naturally, in time, we became very close friends. I admit that Mao's conduct has sometimes indicated that he can be quite hard-hearted, but they can't say that he has no feelings or sentiments at all."

"Well," continued Yang, "I read in the paper that his hair grows very low down on his forehead, and that he has a very ugly face."

"That's perfectly ridiculous! He's really not at all bad looking. In fact, he's quite a normal person."

"They say he wants to kill his own father," reported Yang.

"It's a fact that Mao doesn't get on too well with his father," I agreed, "but that's no reason why he should want to kill him."

"I've also heard that he did very poorly in school; is that so?"

"In general he did not do too well, but his language and literature were good and he wasn't bad in history."

"Can he write essays, and does he do well in calligraphy?"

"Essay writing was always his best subject in school, but his handwriting was always very poor. He couldn't seem to master the art of penmanship. The characters were too large and messy."

"Does he have a good foundation in the classics and philosophy?"

Yang inquired further.

"I should say not! He never did read much from the classics and he never cared for studying from books. However, he does very well in discussion and can write a long essay without saying anything worthwhile, in the fashion of many Chinese scholars."

"This is the first time I've heard anyone say anything good about Mao Tse-tung," explained Yang. "But you must not talk about this anywhere else. It would be very dangerous and it would increase the
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suspicion that you are a Communist.”

“Thank you for the warning,” I said warmly, “I know I cannot speak freely to everyone, but if I can’t talk, I can’t tell lies either!”

“The ancients said, ‘Evil comes out of the mouth.’ In these times, it’s probably better not to talk very much. Between ourselves, of course, we can say anything.” Then he asked, “Tell me, what do you really think of this fellow, Mao Tse-tung? Has he any real ability, knowledge, natural endowment, or talent? What I mean is, does he have any real talent?”

“What is talent?” I asked. “Who is a genius? That’s a very difficult question to answer. I do know, first, that Mao is a person who takes great pains to plan very carefully whatever he undertakes and that he’s a great schemer and organizer. Second, he can estimate quite accurately the power of his enemies. Third, he can hypnotize his audience. He’s really got a terrific power of persuasion and there are very few people who are not carried away by his words. If you agree with what he says, you are his friend; if not, you are his enemy. It’s as simple as that. I came to realize what sort of person he was a very long time ago. If you say he has talent, that he’s a genius, then Chang Hsien-chung and Li Ch’uang, the two famous bandit chiefs, were also geniuses. Their talents are similar. Likewise you can say that Liu Pang and Liu Shiu, the two emperors in the Han Dynasty, were successful men; but had they been less lucky, they would have been bandits. Then no one would have said they were geniuses. You wrote a poem that expresses the idea quite accurately, ‘To become a nobleman or a king is success; to remain a common man is failure.’ From ancient times it has been said that heroes all like to interfere with other people’s business. The hero is one of the world’s madmen. He is always a source of trouble. If there were no brilliant individuals nor madmen, the world would remain at peace.”

“Let’s not discuss the philosophical aspect for the moment,” interrupted Yang. “Do you think that Communism can be put into practice?”

“That depends upon the method of government in operation, and upon the political stability of the country,” I conceded. “If the people are restless and dissatisfied with their form of government, then Communism may spread very rapidly. Remember how the Six Countries
were conquered by the Ch’in Dynasty? That event should more correctly be designated as a failure on the part of the Six Countries than a victory for the Ch’in. The same thing may happen again. If the Communists are successful in China, it will be because their opponents make the same mistakes as did the Six Countries.”

Later events proved this to be the case. At the time of this conversation, the Communists did not anticipate that they could ever dominate the whole of China.

14
Our All-night Talk on the Miao Kao Feng

The daily routine for students of the First Normal was very rigid and their activities were strictly scheduled to the last minute: the times for entering classrooms, the reading rooms, dining room, and the dormitory were all fixed and were indicated by sharp blasts on a trumpet, in imitation of the army bugle. When the trumpet sounded, the thousand or more students all gathered together like so many ducks and they were directed by ten disciplinary officers. Mao and I strongly objected to what we considered unnecessary insistence upon discipline, and we often failed to obey the trumpet blasts. For a time the disciplinary officers reprimanded us, but finally the Principal conceded that since we were good students, and since our conduct records were good, our failure should be ignored.

Our main reason for completely ignoring the trumpet blasts was our desire to carry on uninterruptedly with our conversations. We felt that these talks were very important and of great significance and that there should be no break in their continuity.

As stated above, we always got together after supper and had long discussions while we walked along the river bank. In the summer time, after the rest of the students went to the big study or to the reading room, we often went out and sat on the grass up on the Miao Kao Feng. The Miao Kao Feng was a small hill about two or three hundred meters in height situated just behind the school, and only