Education for the Republic of China in 1912. The reference to military training was, of course, in emulation of Germany and Japan, but Mao thought it most admirable. I did not agree. I remember, during one discussion, I said, "Ts'ai Yüan-p'ei's declaration is sensible enough, but I think it is very commonplace. Only one point, the idea of aesthetic training, raises it somewhat out of the purely commonplace and conventional. Some time ago, he wrote a good essay on this subject, 'Aesthetics in Place of Religion.'"

"But," Mao insisted, "military education is much more important. If the country is weak, what's the good of talking about aesthetics? The first and most important thing to do is to conquer one's enemies! What does it matter if you have an aesthetic education or not?"

"The perfection of the virtues is emphasized in the ancient poems, in the classics, and in music. It's all the same idea."

"If the people are weak, what is the use of perfecting the virtues?" asked Mao. "The most important thing is to be strong. With strength, one can conquer others and to conquer others gives one virtue." Thus our basic philosophies differed, but in the delights and enthusiasms of our youth, we were probably unaware of the depth of our differences.

17
The Hsiu Yeh and Ch'ü Yi Schools

The two middle schools of greatest repute in Changsha City were the Hsiu Yeh and the Ch'ü Yi, though there was one other called the Ming Te.

Two months before my graduation from First Normal in 1915, I was invited to teach in the Hsiu Yeh, and I spent just one semester there. In January, 1916, I went to teach in Ch'ü Yi and I continued in the Ch'ü Yi for more than two years.

I was the only graduate from First Normal that year who was invited to teach in these schools and my fellow students considered this to be a very great honor. Mao Tse-tung was very impressed. Remarks he made to me on several occasions left no doubt that he had great
admiration and respect for learning and intellect, in spite of his alleged
feeling for military education. The talks we had during this period
of my teaching could usually be divided into three distinct categories:
ways of self-cultivation; the reform of China; and a discussion of study
and the latest news.

Mao was very curious to know just how teachers lived. One day,
shortly after I had taken my position in the Hsiu Yeh, he began
questioning me, "How many pupils do you teach?"

I explained that there were fifty-eight students in the class of which
I was head teacher.

"How do you manage to look after fifty-eight students and still
have time to teach?" he wanted to know.

"All head teachers have to take classes as well," I explained. "Just
now I'm teaching several important courses: Chinese language, moral
training, and history."

"How many hours do you teach each week?" he wanted to know,
showing signs that he was visibly impressed.

"I teach twenty hours a week. Apart from that, of course, I have to
correct essays. My students write two each week. And then there is
the preparation."

"That means, besides your teaching, you have to correct a hundred
and sixteen essays every week?" he asked.

"Yes, and after correcting the essays, I have to explain points to
each pupil individually."

"Why should the pupils have to do two essays a week?" he wanted
to know.

"Because it is very good practice for them."

"You work too hard!" Mao concluded.

"Although I have a great deal to do as teacher, I do find pleasure
in it. It is stimulating and challenging. And then, too, the students
like me and I like them. That's important. In this school we're just
like a big family. It's really most interesting to observe the progress
one's pupils are making," I explained.

"I think the educational system should be reformed. The teacher
has to work too hard!" insisted Mao.

"The teachers are really treated very well," I continued, patiently.
"The funds available are limited and they really can't pay for more
MAO TSE-TUNG AND I WERE BEGGARS

 teachers. That's why each one of us has to teach several subjects. I enjoy my work."

About midnight on this same day, some time after Mao left me, a fire which broke out in the students' dormitory spread rapidly to the teachers' residence and caused considerable damage. I lost my suitcase and my bed clothes, but I did manage to save my books.

Mao read about the fire next day in the local newspaper; so in the afternoon, he came around to see me again. "Did you lose much in the fire?" he asked, quite concerned. "But I suppose the school will pay for all the damage and loss of the teachers' belongings?"

"No, the school isn't going to pay for any of the damage suffered by the teachers," I said, telling about my personal losses. "Not only that," I continued, "but this morning, the Principal called all of us together and asked us to contribute from our salaries to help cover the losses of the students. Some of them are very poor, you know."

"But you can't do that! That's too much to ask! Surely you are going to protest!" shouted Mao, greatly disturbed.

"It's really nothing of great importance. It's not worth making trouble over," I explained. "This is just the beginning of the term. I shall carry on teaching for another five months, and then I can decide at the end of the term whether I shall continue or not."

Shortly after this incident Mao came to see me again and asked, "Do you find it interesting to be a teacher?"

"Yes, indeed," I said, "I find it very interesting. You soon get used to it, and one is never bored. Shall I tell you of a rather amusing incident which occurred just the other day?"

"Yes, do, what was it?"

"I think I told you that in my class there are several students who are older than I am. It's often quite obvious that they resent me and that they don't like the idea of having a teacher who is younger than they are. Quite often before class begins, they write something on the blackboard to irritate me, but I pretend not to see it."

"Yes," Mao agreed, "it's best to pretend not to see it; to ignore these things."

"I never punish them."

"But do they write insulting things?" Mao wanted to know.

"No, sometimes they just try to pick extremely difficult passages of
literature for me to explain. When I first took the class, I could see that they were very surprised at my youth. When the Director introduced me to them, he said, 'Do not be misled by Mr. Siao's youthful appearance. I am fifty years old, and I still consider him my Chinese language teacher.' These words of praise completely reassured most of the pupils as to my capabilities, and the atmosphere of the class eased noticeably. But these few older students constantly tried to make things as difficult as possible for me. A few days ago, they had a good chance.

"That was good of the Director to give you such a fine introduction," conceded Mao. "But go on, tell me what happened."

"One of the pupils died and the boys wanted to hold a memorial service. Of course, they knew I could write essays, but the writing of couplets (tui tzu) for the dead is a task usually confined to older and very experienced scholars who can compose in classical language. They presumed that I would not know how and they would be able to humiliate me before the whole school."

"Since you are the Chinese language teacher, you could not refuse their request, if they asked you. But, you are really gifted for that," Mao replied.

"But you don't know how they went about it! Just the day before yesterday, I was sitting in the teachers' rest room after class at eleven o'clock in the morning. Four of these older students came there to see me. They bowed, and one of them said, 'Sir, our classmate Jen has died and we are going to hold a memorial service for him. We wish to write a couplet for the occasion but we don't know how to compose one. Please, sir, will you write it for us?'

"Of course, I was surprised and pleased to have them ask me, and I had not heard of the memorial service. 'Very well,' I said. 'When do you require it?'

"They all answered together as if they had rehearsed, 'The Memorial Service is to be held at four o'clock this afternoon.'

"Of course, I realized immediately, but too late, that this was a trap. That they had deliberately planned to try to make a fool of me. They could have asked me a week ago to compose the couplet for them, but they had deliberately left it till the last moment, hoping that even if I were able to produce anything at all, I would make a very poor show-"
ing. However, nothing was to be gained by remonstrating with them; so I must make the best use of the short time at my disposal to compose something really good, if I did not want to be made a laughing stock. I asked them, 'What relation was Jen to you?'

"They answered that he was their schoolmate, nothing more, and that he came from the same district. I told them that I'd write the couplet in a little while and waited for them to go. But they had not finished. 'Please sir,' they asked, 'will you write it for us in your calligraphy, also. Not later than two o'clock this afternoon, please, because we want everything in the Ceremonial Hall by three.' I tried hard not to show my uneasiness and displeasure with the request, and said I would do it.

"I lay down on the sofa there in the teachers' rest room after they left. My mind was a blank. Through the window I watched the fluffy snowflakes floating idly past. The heavy leaden sky seemed to press down as if it would crush the school, and an air of melancholy pervaded everything. Immediately, I had an idea for the first line: *We weep for our schoolmate, and for our country; the winter day gives birth to tears of sadness, which fall on the plum blossoms of the snow."

"That's very good for the first line," Mao said, "but the second part is always much more difficult."

"Yes, and after that first line, my mind again went completely blank. I just couldn't think how to start the second line. Half an hour passed and still I hadn't written a single word. I began to get worried and annoyed. The time was too short. After lunch, at one o'clock I had a class; so I had only an hour and a half in which to think of something really good. Then I had to go to the lavatory. I often get an inspiration there, and this time the god of the lavatory smiled on me. I had an inspiration and wrote out the last line!"

"Tell me, what did you write?" asked Mao.

"I wrote: *The gods gave this man life, but they also decreed his sojourn here be short; awe-inspiring are the decisions of heaven. Who can jump free from the circle of life and death? I felt quite pleased with this last line." I concluded.

"You should. It really is excellent!" exclaimed Mao. "What did your pupils say?"
At exactly two o'clock, the four students came again, followed by a group of lookers-on. They tried not to show their surprise that the couplet was completed. One of them said, 'Please, sir, write quickly!' I asked if the ink was ready and if they had prepared the squared cloth for me to write upon. 'The ink is all ready,' they said, 'but we haven't finished the cloth because we didn't know how many words there were to be on each side.'

'There are just twenty words in each line,' I told them. 'Please hurry and draw the lines. Quick! Quick!' They prepared the cloth very quickly and I wrote out the couplet. They thanked me and went off to the Ceremonial Hall to hang it up.'

Mao asked if there were any other really good couplets in the Hall; so I told him the rest of the story.

At two o'clock, all the classes were dismissed; so that preparations for the memorial service at four o'clock could be made. About three, I went to the Ceremonial Hall. It's a very large room and there were more than two hundred couplets for the dead boy, hanging on the four walls. Everyone was looking at them and commenting. Big Beard Wang was there, too. We gave him this nickname because he had a long, thick black beard. He had obtained the highest degree in the Imperial Examinations and he is the head Chinese language professor. Naturally, he's considered the supreme authority on matters of literature in the school. When I entered the room, I saw him in the distance, reading my couplet with a crowd of students around him. He was explaining it to them. Then he read it aloud, giving it the full rhythm as if he were singing it. When he finished, he turned to the students, 'Good! Very good, indeed! Who wrote it?' One of the students said, 'It's Mr. Siao's.' Then someone saw me and, with Mr. Wang leading, they all came toward me. Mr. Wang said, enthusiastically, 'Excellent! Excellent! There's no doubt at all that your couplet is the best in the room! It's admirable!'

'The looks of astonishment on the faces of the students were most amusing. Then the Principal came up and congratulated me very warmly. At four o'clock the service started, with the Principal presiding. Then, after the ceremony, he made a speech in which he again praised my couplet. All the people in the hall kept looking at me while he talked and it almost seemed that the meeting was being held in my
honor instead of as a memorial service for the dead. After the service
was over, Mr. Wang took my hand and we went out together first,
followed by the Principal. I felt as if I had just received a greatly
coveted diploma in literature.

“As you can imagine, I have had no further trouble with those
older students,” I concluded. “They all treat me with great respect,
bowing to me whenever we happen to meet, either in the school or out
on the street. They are so quiet in the classroom, it’s just like being in
the church!”

Mao thought quietly for a moment and then he spoke, “I can un-
derstand how difficult it must be for the student to believe everything
the teacher says. But it is vitally important for the teacher to create
confidence in his students.”

Time passed rapidly and soon my first semester of teaching came to
a close. One day I met Mr. Wang, Mao Tse-tung’s uncle, who asked
me if I was happy in the Hsiu Yeh School. I told him that though I
was quite happy in my work, I was also very tired, and that I had not
yet decided if I wanted to continue teaching the next year. He told
me the Ch’u Yi School needed a good teacher, and he invited me to
accept the post there. I thought it over for a time and, since the Ch’u
Yi was a school of excellent standing, I decided to accept the position.

18
The Beggar Life

In January of 1916 I started teaching at the Ch’u Yi School. The next
year when the time came for the summer vacation of almost three
months, I felt that I needed a change. So I decided to spend the sum-
er as a beggar.

The attraction of the beggar’s life for me was the ability to over-
come physical and psychological difficulties inherent in living outside
the accepted pale of society. In China and in the East generally from
time immemorial, begging has been considered a profession, rather
than, as in the West, a mark of poverty or improvidence. It is fas-
cinating to try travel about the country without a cent in one’s pocket.