On the Way to School

Next morning, Mao was up at dawn, full of his plans and his ambitions. While his father silently went off as usual to his field, Mao made packages of his few belongings. Within a few minutes, he had everything ready: a blue mosquito net, an essential article even for the poorest peasants during the Hunan summers; two white sheets, which had turned gray with the passage of time and many washings; and several old and faded tunics. All these were rolled up together into one bundle which he tied to one end of his carrying pole. To the other end, he tied a basket containing his two precious books, the San Kuo Chih Yen I and the Shui Hu.

His mother watched him anxiously and when he was all ready to go, she asked, “Are you going to say goodbye to your father?”

“No, I am not,” answered Mao.

“Do you need anything more to take with you?”

“No, I have everything I need,” answered her son.

Without another word or gesture of farewell, Mao left his old thatched home in Siangtan and strode off down the road, not even turning his head to look back at his old mother, standing in the door.

In the same way as he had previously been accustomed to carrying the double loads of manure, he now carried his luggage, suspended from a pole, his clothes on one end and his precious books on the other. But this load was very much lighter, with the two sides so well balanced that he hardly felt that he was carrying any weight at all. (10)

Only a few minutes’ walk from his home, he met Old Wang, one of his father’s neighbors, who stopped in astonishment to see Mao with his new shoes and socks on. In China, the poor farmer and his children wear socks only for very special occasions.

“Little Mao, how fine you look with your shoes on!” said Old Wang.

“I am going to school!” stated Mao proudly.

“Whatever are you going to school for?” asked Old Wang incredulously.
To study, of course."

"You're going to study? You're going to become a scholar?" laughed Wang.

"Yes, and pray tell, why not?" asked Mao, his spirits somewhat dampened by this unexpected attack.

Old Wang laughed until the tears rolled unheeded down his brown cheeks, while Mao watched in embarrassment. When he finally regained his composure, he asked, "What school are you going to?"

"To the Tungshan Primary School in the big city."
“Oh, so you’re going to a foreign school,” he scoffed. “You want to become a foreign student who puts on a white uniform as one in mourning?” In China, white is mourning color, and in the modern schools, the pupils wear white uniforms in the summer. “Your father and mother are not dead,” he continued. “Why do you want to go into mourning before they die? What madness is this? Does your father approve of your going to school? What good can come of these foreign customs? Has your father gone completely mad, too? I really don’t know what our country is coming to . . . going to school!”

Mao was very angry now and he shouted, “You are just old-fashioned and out of date! You don’t know anything!” and he strode off down the road, leaving old Wang staring after him in amazement.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, on and on he went. The road seemed endless. After crossing a wide stretch of monotonous fields, he climbed a mountain, only to see before him another apparently unending expanse of flat fields. He squared his shoulders, set his teeth and determinedly carried on, although he was already feeling very tired and footsore.

When Mao arrived at the foot of the mountain, he discovered a young boy who was quite smartly dressed seated on the ground with an old laborer, under a huge tree. Sitting down beside them, Mao addressed himself to the little boy, “I, too, am tired, and would like to rest a while with you. What’s your name?”

The little boy looked uncertainly from Mao to the old laborer before he replied, “My name is Li Ta-fan. And what is yours?”

“I am called Mao Tse-tung. Where are you going? Are you a student? What school do you go to?” Mao hurled the questions at him for he was most anxious to cultivate his first contact with this new, strange world.

“I attend the Lienping Primary School. There are two primary schools in the big city. The one on the outskirts is called Tungshan.”

Mao Tse-tung was delighted to have met a school boy who could tell him about Tungshan and about life in the foreign schools. He wanted to take full advantage of this opportunity to satisfy the curiosity which had consumed him for so long, and he set about plying little Li Ta-fan with questions. “How many students are there in your school?”
“About a hundred,” answered Li Ta-fan.
“How big are they? Are any of them bigger than you are?”
“I am ten years old and am in the second-year class. In the third-year class, the boys are eleven or twelve years old, and they are a little bigger than I am. Lienping, you know, is a primary school for little boys.”
“How many teachers are there in your school?”
“We have five teachers.”
“Are they very strict?” Mao wanted to know.
“Yes, the teachers are quite strict.”
“I have heard that caning the hands is the only method of punishment used in the modern schools. Is that true?”
“No, that is not so. We have one teacher, Pong, who often strikes us with his heavy stick. He is very strict and often hurts us.”
“And do you put up with that without doing anything?” asked Mao in astonishment.
(Of course. What can we do?” asked Li Ta-fan.
“You shouldn’t allow him to punish you like that.”
“But we are just children, and he is a big man,” answered Li Ta-fan in surprise at such an unheard-of suggestion.
“Yes, but there are many of you and he is only one. It would be easy to stop him.”
“Yes, but he is a teacher, and we have to respect a teacher. You just don’t understand.”
“When he is cruel to you, do you still respect him?” asked Mao incredulously.
“All of us are afraid of him—all of my schoolmates. We dare not say a word against him. Oh no, there is nothing we could do.”
“You boys are just fools,” said Mao in great disgust at such a passive attitude.
“It’s all very well for you to laugh at us. If you were in our place, you would do exactly the same.”
“Oh, I would? If I were in your place, I’d kill him. It’s really quite simple,” declared Mao, maliciously.
“Oh, you are a very bad person,” cried Li Ta-fan. “You frighten me! My mother warned me not to speak to anyone on the road. I don’t want to talk with you any more. I’m going.”
"Are you really afraid of me? You needn't be. You have the old man to protect you. Anyway, I was only joking when I said I'd kill the teacher. I want to ask you another question."

Li Ta-fan had stood up uncertainly, and now said it was time for him and the old laborer to continue their journey. It was still a long way to the big city. Mao Tse-tung said he would accompany them, since he was also going to the big city. And then they could continue their conversation. The boy did not reply and the three set off together toward the big city.

After walking in silence for a few minutes, Mao began to scold, "Why do you walk so slow? We'll never get to the city at this rate. You've got to walk faster! Now hurry."

"I can't walk any faster. I'm only a little boy, and I can't take such long steps."

"You said you were ten years old. You walk just like a baby," scoffed Mao.

"Don't bother about me. You just walk on ahead by yourself. I didn't ask you to walk with us."

"But I don't want to walk by myself. I want to walk with you. I want you to try to walk faster. Take longer steps. Go faster, faster, faster!"

The little boy began to sob as he walked. The old man, who had listened to the conversation, was very angry, but he dared not say a word. Mao was very big and strong, and the old man didn't fancy having an argument with one who boasted that he would kill a teacher!

Mao really was distressed, but he didn't know what to do. So he began to tease the child, "Crying because I tell you to walk faster! What a baby. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Then the three continued to walk in silence. After going about twenty minutes, they came to a little shelter by the roadside where several travelers were resting.

"Let's stop here for a few minutes," the child said to the old man, ignoring Mao.

Mao sat down beside them, and in his most pleasant manner asked, "Would you like something to eat? Perhaps you are hungry?"

Li Ta-fan refused but the old man suggested, "I think he is thirsty. I'm sure you must be thirsty too, after the long walk."
Mao understood what the old man meant, and he went off to buy three cups of tea in the kiosk, and as an afterthought, he got a small cake for the little boy. After eating and drinking together, the tension relaxed. Mao had achieved his object. He still had several questions to ask the boy and, as soon as they got back on the road, he started off again.

"Tell me, why do you go to the Lienping School instead of the Tungshan? Isn’t the Tungshan a good school?"

"Yes, the Tungshan is just as good. I go to the Lienping because my uncle is a teacher there."

"Tell me, little boy, are there any big students of fourteen or fifteen at Tungshan?"

"Oh, I don’t think so. It is a primary school for little boys."

"Do you have any friends at Tungshan School?" asked Mao.

"No, I haven’t," answered Li.

By this time, they were getting quite near to the city gate. "I suppose you’re going to the Lienping School now?" asked Mao.

"Yes, I am," replied Li. "Where are you going? Perhaps you have relatives in the big city and you are going to visit them?"

"No," answered Mao. "I don’t have relatives in the big city. I’m going to the Tungshan School."

"You’re going to visit someone there?"

"No, I’m going there as a student. I’m going to enter the school now."

"Oh, but that’s impossible! You’re too big. You must be joking."

"Oh no, I’m not joking. It’s quite true. I’m going to enter as a student. Good-bye, Li."

"Good-bye, Mao."