* 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.

民国初年（1912），省立第四师范在长沙成立，校长是陈润霖。陈先生是一位著名教育家，也是私立楚怡小学堂的创办者。我们建立了忠实的友谊。之后过了大约三年，他邀请我去楚怡担任高级教师。当毛泽东进入第四师范后，他的第一位老师就是陈润霖。学校的数名学监之中还有一位是我的朋友王季范——毛曾向他借过钱。

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.

湖南政府决定将第四师范与我就读的第一师范合并时，第四师范仅仅成立了几个月。某天一早，我看到他们所有的家具和可移动的设备都搬到了我们学校进行安装，合并后的学校称为湖南省立第一师范。第四师范校长王季范先生也随约两百名学生一起调了进来。第一师范以前有近千名学生，经过合并，现已成为长沙最大的学校。

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.[[1]](#footnote-0)

四师的学生穿得不如一师，因为我们都穿学校制服，而他们衣服款式和颜色都各不相同，看起来就像是刚入伍的新兵。其中一个“新兵”是一个高大、笨拙、穿着脏乱的青年，他脚上那双鞋亟待修理。 这个青年，就是毛泽东。

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 acquaint ance 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![[2]](#footnote-1)

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 Tse-tung’s request was at the same time a manner of offering me his friend ship, 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.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)