


Poems of Mao Tse-tung

TRANSLATION, INTRODUCTION, AND NOTES BY

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Chingkang Mountain

Autumn, 1928

Chingkang is a wide mountain area roughly 27 miles wide and 170 miles long. The peak on which Mao and the small Red Army group he brought there in October of 1927 after the failure of the "Autumn Harvest Uprising" in Hunan was named Ta Hsiao Wu Chin (Five Big-Little Wells, for the springs which flowed there). Mao had a thousand men and two hundred rifles. There were Buddhist temples all over the mountain which the Reds used as hospitals, offices, and dormitories. Clothes were hung on the agedarkened statues of the god. A printing press was set up, and newspapers were printed on the backs of Buddhist scrolls. Chingkang is on the border between the southern parts of Hunan and Kiangsi Provinces, the two regions in which Mao began his first operations as organizer and militant, armed enemy both of warlords and the Nationalist party. If there is one place which can be described as: "This is where it all began," it is Chingkang Mountain. Here the terms of guerrilla warfare were worked out in the most practical and painful way—by fighting and dying. Once Mao left the mountain in 1928, his struggle was never-ending until it culminated in the capture of the capital Nanking in April, 1949.

The troops of the Nationalist party assaulted the mountain many times, but the gorges, rough slopes, and forests made defense possible. The winter was bitter, food was scarce. Two bandits with armed peasants, Wang Tso and Yuan Wen-t'sai, threatened Mao's small band, but were persuaded to join instead. Conditions were rough, the sol-

diers inventing the slogan, "Down with capitalism; eat squash."

Communist politics are, if possible, more complicated than any in the world. Lyrical as Mao's verse is, the real basis of his poetry only reveals itself through a knowledge of the political scene. The terrible twentieth century (surely more men, women, and children have died violently than in any other period of the dismayed world's history) has produced a vast quantity of verse with political intent, most of it dreadful. In Mao the politics and the poetry are like bands of muscle wrapped around each other: when one is flexed, the other moves. Thus, "Chingkang Mountain" is a poem about power: the Nationalist party trying to destroy the Red force; the Reds not trying to expand, but merely to survive. And because they did survive, the guerrilla wars of the following years, culminating in the Long March, were possible.

Mao left the mountain in January, 1929, and began establishing soviets in southern Kiangsi.

Huang yang chieh is a place of winding and dangerous paths where several times the Nationalist party forces attacked and were repulsed. The noise of the cannon refers to a barrage fired to protect and conceal the retreat of the Chiang troops. Mao deliberately left Huang yang chieh unprotected to lure the Chiang troops into the ambush of his guerrilla soldiers.

CHINGKANG MOUNTAIN

Autumn 1928

Below the mountain, their flags flying,
High on the mountain, our bugles blowing:
A thousand circles of the enemy around us:
we still stand unmoved.

Defense is deadly, trench and wall,
the strongest fort is our will.
From Huang yang chieh cannon roar,
crying: the enemy runs away in the night.

LIUPAN MOUNTAIN

October 1935

Heaven high, clouds light:
watching wild geese
fly south and disappear.
Only heroes will reach the Great Wall.
Counting up, we have walked twenty thousand li.

On the peak of Liupan Mountain
red flags fipple in the west wind.
Today the long rope is in our hands:
when shall we tie up the Gray Dragon?

Snow

February 1936

This is probably Mao's best-known poem. It seems to have been given to his friend Liu Ya-tzu when they met in Chungking in 1945 at the fruitless efforts at reconciliation between the Nationalists and the Communists. It was published in a newspaper, *Ta Kung Pao*.

Here again Mao expresses not only his quick sense of the Chinese landscape but also his belief that, great as some of the earlier leaders of China may have been, they lacked a final triumphant quality which would make China great. They were powerful, but they did not bring fulfillment to Chinese life. Snow alters the landscape, the Communist way will turn it red.

The mountains are those of the high plateaus in Shensi and Shansi provinces in the northwest of China.

Chin Huang was the first emperor of the Chin Dynasty (246-210 B.C.). He built the Great Wall. Han Wu (140-87 B.C.), of the Eastern Han Dynasty, fought the Hun invasion from the north. T'ang Tsung (627-649 A.D.) was politically and militarily powerful at the beginning of the T'ang Dynasty, famous for its poetry. Sung Tsu (960-976) was first emperor of the Sung Dynasty. Genghis Khan (1206-1227) was a Mongol emperor.

These five emperors represent traditional old China in every way. It seems that Mao, consciously or unconsciously, compares himself with these emperors, although he rejects them and feels superior to them.

SNOW

February 1936

Landscape of the north:
hundreds of miles ice-frozen,
thousands of miles snow flying.
Look at the Great Wall,
this side, other side,
only white wilderness.
Up and down the Yellow River,
suddenly deep waves disappear.
Mountains, silver snakes dancing;
plateaus, wax-white elephants running,
trying to be higher than heaven.
Some fine day you will see the land
dressed in red, wrapped with white,
flirting, enchanting.

Rivers and mountains so beautiful
heroes compete
in bowing humbly before them.
Pity Emperors Chin Huang and Han Wu,
not brilliant enough in letters.
Pity Emperors T'ang Tsung and Sung Tsu,
not radiant enough in poetry.
That tough spoiled child of heaven,
Genghis Khan,
only knew how to pull the bow
shooting eagles.
All are gone.
For heroes, now is the time.

The Capture of Nanking by the People's Liberation Army

April 1949

Nanking had several times been the capital of China before Chiang Kai-shek made it the seat of government for the Nationalists.

The decisive year of the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists was 1949, when Peking ("Northern Capital") was captured by the Red Army in January and Nanking ("Southern Capital") in April. From the small armies Mao had in 1945 at the end of the Japanese war, his forces had grown with astonishing speed, until he could truthfully say, as he does in this poem, that he had a million men able to cross the Yangtze and assault Nanking on the south bank. From that day, April 23, the defeat of such Nationalist troops as remained was certain. Some generals took entire divisions over to the Red Army. Peking, indeed, was surrendered without a direct attack. By this time, the Communists were excellently armed with captured American equipment.

It was characteristic of Mao, that old guerrilla fighter, that when he proclaimed the People's Republic of China the parade which crossed the square in front of the Tien An Men, or "Gate of Heavenly Peace," in Peking contained only captured tanks, cannon, and armored trucks. It was also characteristic of Mao that the display of military might should end with *yang-k'o* (rice sprout song) dancers.

It was also characteristic of Mao that he should write a poem about the capture of Nanking within a few days of its taking. He had written earlier poems about battles, "Chingkang Mountain" in 1928, "From Tingchow to

Changsha" in 1930, and the poems on the first and second sieges of the Red Army by the Nationalists in 1931. Many battles did not move him to verse, but the capture of Nanking obviously represented for him that decisive turning away from the past and toward the future which he imaginatively expresses in the last line as ocean turning into fields of mulberry trees, the vision of a new and creative China which occurs so often in his poems as his greatest single theme.

It was also characteristic of Mao that he should, as frequently in his poems, combine Chinese mythology with Communist action. The last line is apparently based on the story of an immortal woman, Ma-ku, who was young, beautiful, with hands shaped like the claws of a bird. She had three times seen the ocean dry up and turn into fields covered with mulberry trees.

Classical writers in China had centuries ago compared the city of Nanking to a "crouching tiger" and the Chung Mountain east of the city to a "curling dragon."

Hsiang Yü was the leader of a force rebelling against the Chin Dynasty in the third century B.C. Wishing to make a reputation for compassion, he did not kill his enemy Liu Pang after capturing him. Later Liu in turn defeated Hsiang Yü, who committed suicide. Liu then became first emperor of the Han Dynasty. The poem is one more example of Mao putting into verse what he had already uttered in prose. At the end of 1947 he had written to the Red Army: "Make wiping out the enemy's effective strength our main objective; do not make holding or seizing a city or place our main objective . . ." This openly explains in prose what his line about Hsiang Yü symbolizes in poetry.

The line, "The sky, if it had feeling, would also grow old," is from the "Song of the Immortal Bidding Farewell to Han" by the poet Li Ho (791-817 A.D.) in the T'ang Dynasty. A translation of the relevant lines would read, "If god could suffer as we do/God too would grow old."

No poems of Mao written between 1937 and 1948 are available. In that period, Mao was engaged in writing

theoretical essays such as "On Contradiction," "On the Coalition Government," and "On the New Democracy," and in fighting the Japanese in northwest China, as well as fending off attacks by the Nationalists on Communist bases. It is interesting to quote the interpretation of this poem, and the event it describes, in basically Marxist terms. The following is taken from a translation by Roswitha Haller of the notes on this poem written by Joachim Schickel for the German translation of *37 Gedichte* (37 Poems by Mao Tse-tung), *Übersetzt und mit einem politisch-literarischen Essay*. No evidence exists to indicate whether Mao accepts this point of view, which argues that Nanking had been the crucial point for opposing domination from the north. It was in Nanking that the T'ai-p'ing rebels began their effort to overthrow the Manchu Dynasty.

Nanking is the wound which the Chinese have inflicted upon each other; for centuries it has attracted war and every time it has paid for its grandeur with ruin. If the lyrical poets say Nanking they mean transitoriness . . . Already the first verse of Mao stands in contradiction to this, when he has wind and rain break out on the Chung Mountain . . . the melancholy of power, the sadness of triumph are swept away. . . .

The appeal to heaven [In this translation, "sky."—TRANSLATORS] is not accidental: heaven commands that one man rule, it renews the command that a new ruler take the place of the bad ruler; but heaven gives this command through the people and executes it through the army. China's political science, shaped by the ancient Confucian tradition, always considered an overthrow legal as soon as a ruler or his dynasty had lost their command. To our legal thinking, rebellion and even mere resistance are somewhat uncomfortable; it is considered a juridical "illusion" to think that "a legal way and a legal procedure could be opened up" for the revolution, that it could be tamed constitutionally. This European illusion has always been and remained a Chinese reality. Even a historian like Wolfgang Franke, who was not a Communist and only concerned with the truth, could not help seeing the Confucian principle of legality at work in present day China. "Disappointment and exasperation at the total failure of the Nationalist government spread more and more in China," he writes, "the sympathies

turned increasingly towards the Communists . . . because people saw in them a healthy power which was not contaminated by corruption, because they alone were capable of replacing the demoralized, no longer viable, government of the Nationalists. The traditional belief . . . of the change in heaven's command played a vital role in this. The Nationalists had not lived up to the command; now it was given to the Communists. Basically, the Communist takeover was no different from similar situations in the past, as, for example, the overthrow of the Mongolian rule or the foundation of the Ming Dynasty."

In the issue 7/1964 of the illustrated *China in Pictures* one of the paintings reproduced "after the verse of Chairman Mao Tse-tung" shows the crossing of the Yangtze: boat by boat . . . they sail under the wind. . . . The crossing of the stream, which is four kilometres wide—formerly considered impossible by experts and afterwards regarded as one of the most important operations of the century—was carried out like a manoeuvre, of gigantic proportions At dawn the first boats took off by the thousands, in the evening there had literally happened what the verse says: a million soldiers stood on the other side of the river; not a poetically exaggerated number, but the actual strength of this army.

On April 21 they had been given this order: Advance bravely and destroy thoroughly, decisively the Nationalist reactionaries who dare to offer resistance within the boundaries of China. Liberate the people in the entire country. Protect the independence and entirety of China's territory and sovereignty. . . . It is known, among others, from Dedijer's biography of Tito, that to the end of the Forties Stalin regarded as unrealistic an uncompromising policy of the Communist party of China and thus he repeatedly tried to make them support Chiang Kai-shek, as he himself practised. An open innuendo to Stalin's advice even against the southern offensive is found in Kuo Mo-jo's commentary . . . : "Before and after the campaign for the liberation of Nanking, there were well-meaning friends, within and without the country, who said we should be content with separate governments in the North and the South of China and should not provoke the intervention of, in particular, American imperialism." [It is assumed that the outside "friend" meant here was Stalin, always very concerned about the Chinese Communists provoking foreign intervention.—TRANSLATORS]

Verse six tells us why Mao did not accept the certainly well-

meant advice, why the enemy, particularly since it was desperate, had to be persecuted. Hsiang Yü, tyrant of the kingdom Ch'u, spared the life of Liu Pang when he could have taken it. So he obtained fame as one who showed mercy, and a little later also his own downfall—by the hand of Liu Pang. Anyone who can lose a hand apart from his life must learn from Hsiang Yü, he must not value higher the praise of his own humanity than the people who are entrusted to him.

One of Mao's favorite themes in his poems is the triumph of man over nature, controlling it, as with dams and bridges, for social purposes, even changing the sterile salt water into fertile fields. Thus, the last line symbolizes not only the changing of nature but especially the changing of society, the old Nationalist order being turned into more productive and, by the Communist definition, more "democratic" ways.

THE CAPTURE OF NANKING BY THE
PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

April 1949

Over Chung Mountain, sudden wind, rain rising.
Over the Yangtze, a mighty million army crossing.
The city: tiger crouching. Mountain: dragon curling.
The past surpassed,
Sky turned around, earth turned over,
daring and courage.
All bravery left should drive the enemy,
but not like fame-frantic Hsiang Yü.
The sky, if it had feeling, would also grow old,
but in the human world, it is right
for water to turn into fields of mulberry trees.

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Reply to Mr. Liu Ya-tzu

April 1949

Mr. Liu Ya-tzu was a poet, a native of Wuchiang in Kiangsu Province. He was a revolutionary from the end of the Ching Dynasty (1911). After welcoming Mao Tse-tung at the Peking airport in late March, 1949, he wanted to return to his native place. Mao wrote this poem to dissuade him. It is in the same form as Mao's poem on the *Long March*: seven characters in each line with strict tonal patterns, rimes, and paired meters, from the T'ang Dynasty.

The two friends used to drink tea together in Canton in 1925 and 1926 when Mao was urging agricultural reforms. In 1941 Liu sent Mao a poem to Yenan telling him that he could not forget "those Canton tea-talks."

In August, 1945, Chiang sent Mao a telegram, requesting a meeting in Chungking, civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists being imminent. Mao replied: "My humble self is most willing to come to Chungking to discuss peace and national reconstruction with you." It was signed, "Your younger brother." The Americans had guaranteed Mao's safety in Chungking. It was the first time he had flown in an airplane. Chiang and Mao were suspicious of each other.

It was while Mao was in Chungking that Liu wrote him a poem: "Nineteen autumns have gone by since our parting in Canton/ Happy now in Chungking to shake hands again." After praising Mao for his bravery in the past years and comparing him to "life-saving rain," Liu says that Mao is like Kunlun Mountain in stature.

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MAO TSETUNG

POEMS

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