

Ideals in the Mountains: Hiking with Mao and his Friends

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In September of 1917, the young Mao Zedong went for a few days hiking in the mountains of Hunan with two friends, Peng Zehou and Zhang Kundi (who writes of the hike). They met at the Fishing Bay Market Place in Changsha and initially hiked southward along the Changjiang (Yangze) River. After some 26 *li*, or roughly 13 kilometres, they stopped for a massive lunch – five bowls of rice and five of pickled vegetables. Since the day was hot, they swam in the deep, clear waters of the river to cool down. Later that afternoon, they reached a mountain called Zhaoshan (near Xiangtan, Mao's home town).

Now they climbed upwards, following a narrow path until they reached Zhaoshan Temple, which had three or four monks. Initially, the monks would not let them sleep in the temple, so they contemplated sleeping in the open. Later, the monks relented, so they ate dinner and went down again to the river for a swim. Zhang Kundi writes:

Following our swim we sat on the beach and talked. A cool breeze dispelled the heat and the rippling waves of the water accompanied our talk like music coming from an unknown source ... Under the bright starlight, the trees were a deep green and seemed full of vitality.

Upon returning to the temple in the dark, the monks showed them a massive bed and gave them one small cotton quilt under which to sleep. But the three young friends found a small pavilion, where they sat and talked and laughed long into the night.

'The Westerners', Mao said, 'have a highly advanced material civilisation, but it is limited to clothing, food, and housing, and it provides only for the development of fleshly desires. If human life is just having enough of these three things, clothes, food, and housing, then human life has no value. We must figure out the easiest way to solve the economic problem. Only then can we realise our ideal of cosmopolitanism. If man's physical and mental powers are concentrated on one task, no task will be difficult to accomplish'.

Peng Zehou said: 'I have long-cherished desire to become a monk. When I am a monk, I will invite you all to come and study on a famous mountain'.

'I too have such a desire', said Mao.

'And so do I', said Zhang Kundi. 'But your desire is much stronger than mine'.

Kundi writes that he was very moved at the time, and the words of a poem came to him:

Wind blowing in the trees, music of the heavens

Desires and rewards cannot be perceived, and shed their forms

The following afternoon, they went swimming again, and then climbed another mountain, where their friend Cai Hesen lived. The discussion among the young people turned to revolution. They advocated – idealistically – a family revolution and revolution of students and teaches – without force of arms. All that was needed was a replacing of the old with the new. Chinese people, they agreed were slavish in character and narrow-minded. They acted like masters at home and like slaves to the rest of the world.

On the last day of their hike, they rose very early and climbed the nearby Mount Yuelu. While descending, a cold mountain wind came up and the air was clean and crisp. Bathed by the air and the wind, their minds were lucid and the worries of the ordinary world seemed far away. But by lunch time, that world returned and the hike and its talk and dreams seemed far away.

(Based on a story by Zhang Kundi, September 1917)

