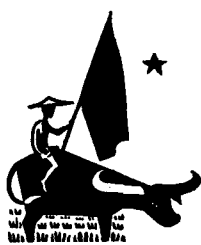


# The 'Overturning' of Sesame Garden Village



Overthrowing a European government by a *coup d'état* at the top is perhaps an exact science when done by an efficient party of trained "cadres" with arms in hand.

But making a revolution from the bottom up, village by village, as was done in China, is an inexact art that demands a world of patience, an infinity of cunning, and a bellyful of resolution. Such activities, if fumbled at, can become dangerous.

I think I can best illustrate the difficulty of making this type of revolution by telling the story of Sesame Garden, a village of four thousand people located in north Honan Province, between the Peking-Hankow Railway and a range of hills, old and redolent of Chinese legend, that are known as the Taihang Mountains.

As Chinese villages go, Sesame Garden is very large, being inhabited by 950 families. Nearly all of these people live in dwellings that are made simply from the soil of the north China plain, molded into adobe bricks, dried until they cease to shrink. The houses are cold in the winter and hot in the summer: When they become damp they crumble like candy houses in the rain. However, in the northwest corner of the village there are homes of a different sort: a group of imposing stone mansions, with many courtyards and splendid gardens. These, until recently, belonged to Chao Hung-pai, whose name literally translates as "Great Count Chao."

The grandfather of the count was a common farmer. One day a hundred years ago, a passing merchant stopped

at his home, mysteriously took ill, and suddenly died. Grandfather Chao slit open the merchant's long-gown, discovered a hoard of silver hidden there, and with the funds thus obtained opened a pawn shop. Within a decade, by means of money lent at high interest rates and by foreclosures against mortgaged farm tools, crops, and land, the elder Chao had managed to bankrupt his neighbors and acquire a large estate.

The count's father and the count himself both added to the family fortunes. Within a period of fifty years Sesame Garden had changed from a village of independent peasant proprietors into a sharecropping community, almost the private preserve of the Chao family.

In order to protect its holdings, the family trained the count for government service. For thirty-five years the count followed the trade of bureaucrat, and by the 1930's he was chief secretary of the provincial government. While in office, as was traditional, he increased his wealth further by means of what he smilingly called "gifts from the people." He purchased coal wells in the fields surrounding his native village and bought small department stores in the neighboring towns.

The count lived in Sesame like a feudal lord. He owned more than forty per cent of all the land in the village. Three hundred and sixty of the 950 families were his tenant farmers, and they paid him fifty per cent of the grain crops they harvested every year.

To care for the needs of the thirty-nine members of his family, Chao employed forty-one hired laborers, numerous watchmen, a troupe of performing gymnasts, including a sixty-year-old strong man, four butlers, three major-domos, six grooms, fifteen

slave girls, twelve old woman-servants, eight wet nurses, and fifteen cooks.

The count had a discriminating but enormous appetite. By the time he was fifty he weighed close to 250 pounds. At sixty, he had only two teeth, but still insisted on eating meat at every meal, even in time of famine. At seventy, he bought and married a twenty-six-year-old slave girl. When peasants slyly asked him why he married such a young woman, he replied with a disarming smile: "We love each other."

As he grew richer, the count drew away from his fellow villagers. They showed their resentment by dubbing him "Moneybags Chao." His half-starving tenants would sometimes remark: "The dogs of the landlord are prouder than we; they eat bread and drink *paikar*, while we eat husks." An old man living beneath the count's walls put this resentment into a song:

*In a mansion by the spring  
Lives a fat and greedy king—  
Tables sag with food and wine;  
Men may starve, but counts  
must dine.*

*What is sorrow? What is pain?  
Empty stomach; lack of grain;  
Lonely nights; vacant bed—  
Only wealthy men can wed.*

The count was a scholarly man, with a kindly bent, and he was so far above the ordinary people that they could never summon up a direct personal enmity toward him. That emotion they reserved for the village loafer, a man named Raingiver Wu, who smoked opium and had so many other bad habits that he was called "Rascal" Wu.

Wu had originally been one of the poorest men in Sesame Garden. In 1938, when the Japanese Army in-

vaded this part of China, the people of Sesame were terrified and refused to come out of their houses. To meet this situation, Count Chao called a meeting of the Committee of Thirty Families—a group of village trustees composed of landlords and rich peasants—and proposed that Wu be made village chief. “Wu is so rascally that only he can deal with the Japanese on their own low level,” reasoned the count.

But the count, like the industrialists of Germany who backed Hitler’s rise to power, was not able completely to control the village ne’er-do-well. With Japanese aid, Wu quickly became head of a district in charge of many villages. After that he organized a troop of a hundred men, armed them with rifles obtained by means of a “self-defense tax,” and gave himself the title of commander-in-chief. Then, having both civil authority and armed power, he began to squeeze the people of Sesame.

If the Japanese placed a hundred-pound grain levy on the village, Wu would raise it to 150 and keep the surplus. Or, seeing a middle-class farmer at work in the fields, he would say: “My grandfather on his deathbed told me your family owed him this land. You must give me half and pay back your debt.” In this manner Wu built up an estate of fifty acres—a very fine holding in land-poor China. To increase his prestige, he built two stone mansions, each two stories high.

Previously, when he was poor, Wu had had a wife and son, but they had left. Now that he was rich, he began searching for another wife, and his eye fell on the most beautiful girl in the village—Silver Blossom, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of a middle-class farmer. Though she was betrothed to another man, though she despised Wu, and though her family did not want her to marry a man of forty-five with such an unsavory reputation, Wu quickly overcame all difficulties by arresting her father and imprisoning him.

In order to forestall any future retaliation, shortly after the wedding Wu had his “blackshooters” (assassins with grease-blackened faces) kidnap his father-in-law and kill him outside the town. In all, forty-two villagers, who had first been squeezed dry by “Rascal” Wu, were murdered, and their bodies thrown into one of Count Chao’s coalpits. The people nursed

their resentment by making up secret verses about Wu also:

*With knives in both his hands,  
At back of door he stands.  
Give me all you’ve got.  
Get away you’ll not.*

During the Japanese War, under the open attacks of Wu and the traditional overlordship of Chao, every branch of life in Sesame Garden began to collapse. The count, unlike Wu, was a Chinese patriot: He refused to have anything to do with the Japanese. But he was so clever in watching his own interests that he lost little during a war in which millions suffered. Chao’s tenants had to pay their grain rents in advance before they could do any planting. As a result, when they brought in the autumn harvest they had to sell it immediately to get ready for the next year’s planting. When winter came, the peasants had nothing to eat.

At one time, the Japanese placed a levy of six *catties* of cotton on each *mow* of land, but the Thirty Families told the peasants the tax was twelve *catties*. They then sold the surplus at exorbitant prices to those peasants who did not grow cotton. Some farmers had no money to buy cotton to meet the levy, and Wu and his soldiers raided their homes, tearing the cloth from their quilts and making off with the cotton lining. Some families froze to death in their beds.

In 1945, the Japanese Empire surrendered, but this meant little to the people of Sesame Garden Village. True, they saw the enemy garrison leave, but taxes were still exorbitant, fifty per cent of the grain still went into the landlords’ hands, and the blackshooters still terrorized the village.

Such was the condition of Sesame Garden Village when four cadres of the Eighth Route Army descended from the Taihang Mountains.

These cadres were not soldiers; they were not armed; they were not members of the Communist Party. They were all students who had but recently fled from Chiang Kai-shek’s areas. Though they were sent by the Red Army, they were all very inexperienced. Their job was to “overturn” Sesame Garden Village.

“Overturn” has been the biggest slogan of the revolution in rural China. In Communist terminology, it means

to turn over the social, political, and economic life in every village, to overturn feudalism and establish democracy, to overturn superstition and establish reason. The first step in the “overturning movement” is to “struggle against” the landlords and divide the land.

When the young cadres first arrived in Sesame Garden they posted proclamations of the “Liberated Areas” government announcing that every village had the right to elect its own officials, and that land rents and rates of interest should be reduced. The startled landlords consulted their bailiffs. “Just pretend you agree with everything,” said the bailiffs. Whereupon they went to the cadres, in the guise of common peasants, and suggested that a farmers’ association be organized to struggle against “evil elements.”

The cadres were completely fooled. Believing they were dealing with “progressive” peasants, they participated in a mass meeting which, unknown to them, had been organized by the henchman of “Rascal” Wu. During this meeting, some of Wu’s blackshooters, posing as impoverished farmers, made impassioned speeches against a group of middle-class peasants, accusing them of lending money at high interest rates and of various other crimes. When the rest of the village saw what was happening, they immediately began to hold aloof. But the inexperienced cadres were so impressed that they reported back to the county government that they had been completely successful. When they had gone, the landlords secretly congratulated their bailiffs but told the people: “From ancient times till now, every government has grafted. Don’t expect anything else from the Eighth Route Army.”

Unknown to the landlords, however, the county government of the Eighth Route Army in the Taihang Mountains decided to make Sesame Garden a model village. Five cadres, more experienced than the first student group, were chosen for the job. The leader of this second group was the son of a bankrupt farmer, named Tang Pi-ling.

When Tang and his workers came down from the mountains and entered Sesame, they were greatly surprised to find the people unfriendly. Whenever a cadre approached a group on the street, it would disperse. When they



*'... many of them had accepted the idea ... that it was their fate to be poor.'*

visited a farmer, he would look at the ground and mumble: "It's dangerous to me if you are here. Please go."

Tang decided not to call any more mass meetings, but to seek out some of the poorer villagers and speak to them.

One day a poor farmer, named Crooked Head, who owned one-third of an acre of land, was carrying manure to the fields and Tang pursued him and helped him spread it.

"You know that the policy of our government is to increase the pay of the workers and get the farmers a better living," said the cadre. "Why then do you run away from us?"

"Let me tell you some words from my heart," said Crooked Head. "Who can speak and who can act? Many people have been killed in our village." He then told Tang the story of Raingiver Wu. "The killings are all by blackshooters. No one knows who they are. But Wu is still here. Who dares speak?"

"Why not?" said Tang. "You have your own farmers' association."

Crooked Head laughed bitterly. "The landlords' dog-legs are running the farmers' association. They are all running in an inner circle. Except for such people, who dares do that kind of work? Before you came, the landlords told us if we struggled we would be cheating them."

"Listen," said Tang, "get some of your friends and come to a private meeting tonight."

That night Crooked Head brought four friends to a secret meeting. With farmers brought by the other cadres, there were perhaps twenty men.

"We are going to talk poor-people talk tonight," said Tang, opening the meeting. "Some of us have been poor for several generations. But just look how rich the landlords are! What is the reason for this difference?"

The farmers looked down at the ground and would not answer. One tentatively said: "The reason we are poor is because our fathers left us no inheritance like Moneybags Chao."

"Were our grandfathers bad men?"

asked Tang. "Did they smoke opium?"

"No."

"Were they able to cultivate land?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, look at Wu. His father left him nothing. Why is he rich now?"

"Ai! Who doesn't know how Wu got his money? He has a good fate. Our fate is bad."

"Well," said Tang, "suppose we don't work for Wu and Chao, don't give them food, just let them stay there. Can they live? If so, their fate is good. If we have wheat flour and can't eat or digest it, or if we have clothes and can't wear them, then our fate is bad. Otherwise you can't blame fate."

This argument particularly interested the farmers, because some of them were in the habit of burning incense at the Temple of the God of Fate, and because many of them had accepted the idea, instilled by the landlords, that it was their fate to be poor. Now one farmer replied. "You are right. If the landlords received nothing from us,



they would all be dead in seven days."

"Then do you still think the wealth of the landlord comes from his father?"

Faces wrinkled with sudden grins. "No," said the farmers, "for if that is the case, we are all the fathers of Count Chao."

"Then is it true that the settlement is only to cheat the landlords?"

"No, it is only natural that we should settle with the landlords."

"Well, if it's natural, shall we make a settlement?" asked the cadre.

The farmers stared at the ground. Then a peasant with a scraggly beard got to his feet and faced them.

"Look at these wrinkles," he said, "and tell me whether I am old. As long as I can remember I have been treated like a mule or an ox. But I am not an animal nor are you. We are men. We must act like men. If we do not struggle when these cadres are here to help us we shall never be able to struggle."

This speech by one of their own kind excited the gathering. At midnight, the twenty farmers reached a conclusion that the time had come for their revenge. They swore a solemn oath: "We will turn over. Even if Chiang Kai-shek's troops come we will turn over. If only for a day we will turn over."

Tang clenched his fist. "Now we are together!" he said. "But twenty men are not enough. We must mobilize the whole village. Go home and tell your friends and relatives."

Despite oaths of secrecy, the landlords had immediate word of the meeting, and within an hour Count Chao came in person to the cadres.

Since the arrival of the first cadres in the village, the count had been acting strangely. Instead of dressing in expensive silk long-gowns, he now went about in cotton pants and jacket, bare-headed, and without his cane. When the cadres asked why he dressed this way, he answered: "To get close to the people." When the villagers put the question to him, he replied: "I dress like this so you won't struggle against me."

Now he stood before the cadres with a curious smile on his face. "I heard the peasants intend to struggle against the landlords," he said. "But I want to tell you I approve of the new government. I agree with Mao Tse-tung that tillers should own the land they cultivate. But I have so much land I

don't know quite how to put it into the hands of the people."

The cadres, nonplused, could do nothing but take the count at his word. "The common people," Tang explained, "do not demand land from you. They want to make a settlement of the debts you owe them. We shall leave you land. Do not be afraid."

"All right, let me wait patiently," said the count.

Whether the count had seen the handwriting on the wall and was making a tactical retreat, whether he had undergone a kind of religious conversion, or whether he had just grown too old to play the role of lord of the manor any longer will never be known. In any event, his attitude confused his fellow landlords, destroyed their self-confidence, and in particular frightened "Rascal" Wu.

Wu had never been able to break the count's secret hold on the village, and when he heard of Chao's statement to the cadres, he fled panic-stricken into the night.

After Wu's flight, the poor of Sesame Garden came more boldly into the open. Now two hundred met in day-long Speak Bitterness Meetings.

Speak Bitterness Meetings—where people publicly pour out their grievances to one another—have been one of the chief psychological weapons of the Communist Party. An old saying in this part of north China that "a poor man has no right to talk" was literally true. Often a poor man possessed no name at all, and was merely called by some aspect of his physical features. For such a man to stand up before his fellow men and pour out his sorrows constituted by its very nature a revolutionary break with the past. In the same moment that he burst through the walls of silence that had enveloped him all his life, the peasant also tore asunder the chains that had bound him to his landlord and to the past.

The effect of such meetings on Sesame Garden was especially intense, because of the abnormal number of tenant sharecroppers and because of the desperate conditions under which they were living. One story of sorrow and cruelty led to another, and scores of grown-up men and women wept publicly. By such methods the poor of

Sesame Garden Village began to identify themselves with each other and even to acquire a class consciousness, just as the Communist Party wished.

After these meetings, Sesame Garden was swept by what is perhaps best described as a convulsive mass passion. From the two hundred most daring sharecroppers, the revolutionary infection spread rapidly through seven hundred families. Casting all caution aside, groups of peasants, armed with hoes, clubs, and spears, burst into the courtyards of the landlords, arrested them, and locked them up.

With two-thirds of the village fully mobilized, the cadres advised the local leaders to proceed against the landlords at once. The next day a Struggle Meeting was held in a great field south of the town. Three thousand men and women, carrying food and water with them, gathered on the meeting ground.

Crooked Head stepped before the crowd. "Today is our Turn Over Meeting," he said. "The sky is clear for us at last. Those who have bitterness, reveal it. Those who want revenge, let them get it!"

"Bring the landlords here!" a farmer shouted. "Let them get on their knees before us."

A shiver of apprehension raced through the audience as the landlords were led onto the field. They had been divided into two groups: ordinary landlords and "sinful" landlords. These last were made to kneel in front of the crowd. The others, among them Count Chao, were allowed to remain standing.

One by one the farmers leveled their accusations. Each plaintiff stated his own name and that of the man he was "struggling against." Clerks were present to write down their words. In the course of the morning and the afternoon the crowd accused the landlords of many crimes; betrayal of resistance members to the Japanese, robbing them of grain and cotton, forcing them into labor gangs, starving tenants to death, beatings, and many other things.

After several hours, Count Chao was brought before them. An old woman stood up and yelled: "You have so much land and you are so fat—how is that? It is our flesh you are wearing!"



The crowd, inflamed, screamed at him. "Kneel! Kneel!"

The count knelt.

The first to confront him was a young widow, the mother of two children, who earned her living by spinning cotton. "Look at me," she said. "I am a woman. I have no man and no land. In one year I cannot harvest two *catties* of cotton. Yet the trustees taxed me five *catties*. When I could not get it, they forced me to give my children to labor for them. I am a woman, but I have to work like a man. Sometimes I am weak from hunger and I cannot work well and then I am beaten . . . Is it not bitter for me? Should I not settle with him?"

The crowd shrieked approval. "Settle with him! Settle!"

The accusations continued, and over a period of two days 143 people "struggled against" Landlord Chao. At the end of all the accusations, Chao was asked if he admitted the charges.

"All those things you have said are true." Chao's voice was humble.

"How did you become rich?" asked a tenant.

"I became rich because I ate your blood."

"What is your heart made of?" screamed a woman.

"I have a black heart."

"Do we deceive you when we make a settlement?"

"No, it is only just to settle with me."

Appeased by this self-abasement, the villagers released the count. During the next few days a farmers' committee reckoned that the thirty trustees owed the village thirteen thousand *piculs* of grain as payment for their extortions during the previous five years. The landlords were also to repay the tenants twenty-five per cent of one year's land rent. After that the land was to be divided.

When face to face with the angry masses the landlords had acknowledged the justice of the debts, but later, when the farmers' committee came to collect payment, the landlords became more daring and said they could not pay what had been ordered.

The tenants were enraged. "You stole so much from us. You are so rich," they said. "Where did it all go?" With hoes on their shoulders, they marched four hundred strong into the homes of the landlords and carted off furniture, jewelry, and furs, which they put in a field and then publicly divided.

Among all the landlords, only Count Chao did not seek to hide his wealth. "I am old and cannot live long," he said. "What is the use of keeping these things while others are starving?"

Later, when the village was calm once more, a Criticism Committee was organized to make a temporary division of the land. There were five categories of farmers. The completely destitute and the poor were given land and grain immediately. Low-middle, middle, and upper-middle farmers divided some of the surplus grain of the landlords and some of the furniture. Originally four hundred families in Sesame Garden had no land, but now every one of them received land.

After the "settlement" was completed, the cadres organized the peasants into mutual-help groups to reclaim wasteland. In three days wild grass was cleared from more than fifty acres. The fields left to the landlords

were also covered with wild grass, but the farmers refused to form labor co-operatives with them.

For the first time, the cadres opposed the common farmers. "You should know," they said, "that the policy of our government is to give everyone enough to eat. If wild grass grows on the landlords' fields, their crops will be poor. So we must form labor co-operatives with these men also."

After the work was finished a landlord said to the cadres, "I was afraid that the people would struggle against me again and again. But now that they have begun to work with me, my heart is quiet, and I can work hard."

Many former tenants, however, were afraid that the landlords might again become rich. Again the cadres delivered a lecture. "You know," said Tang, "we settled with the landlords because they received a surplus from the labor of other men. We do not mean that rich men are bad. If a man gets rich by his own toil that is very good."

Count Chao at first wanted to give up all his land, but the cadres would not allow this. "We do not want anyone to starve," they said: "you are too old to work as a laborer."

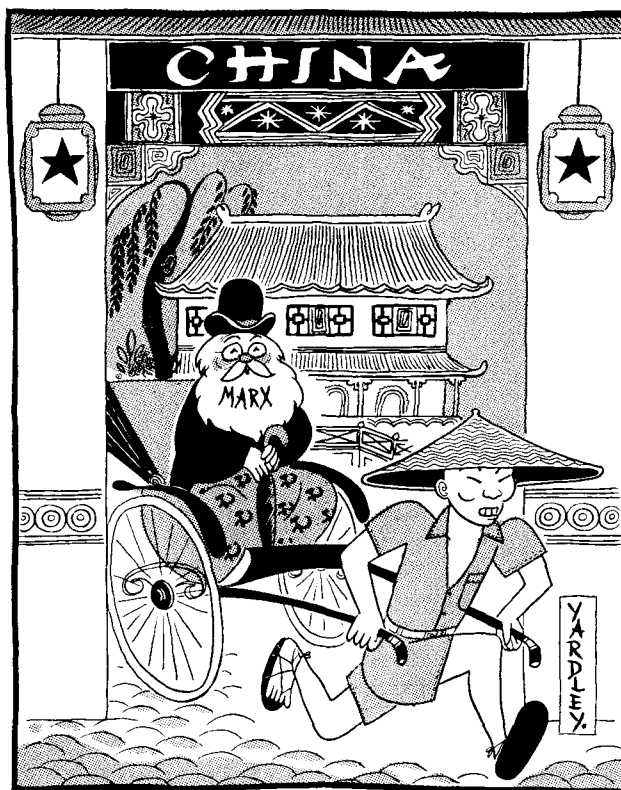
Though the other landlords were not left more than two or three *mow* of land, the villagers let Chao keep seventy *mow* because of his patriotism in the war.

And now the watchmen, the gymnasts, the slave girls, and the wet nurses have all gone, but the sixty-year-old strong man remains. He and the count eat together and joke about their weight.

The count was allowed to keep three shops, a cigarette factory, and a small department store. A portion of one house has been left him. There are four persons with him; his daughter, one personal servant, the strong man, and the slave girl who became his wife. The count still says: "We love each other."

According to the latest reports Count Chao has an important position in the provincial government.

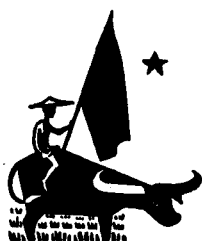
—JACK BELDEN



The Open Door

# Mao Tse-tung

## As I Know Him



Mao Tse-tung has been the leader of the Chinese Communist Party for two decades. Today, at fifty-six, he is the president of the world's most populous nation. By multitudes of peasants, he is called "the saving star." In the strange, tight, iron brotherhood of his own party and army he is simply the *chu hsi*, or chairman.

Mao's authority is immense, but it would be a mistake to attribute the cataclysmic events in China to any single leader. Mao is not the creator of the Chinese revolution, but its creation. Because he learned how to control its forces for practical ends, he finds himself today at the apex of a system of power which guides the destiny of half a billion men. He is the first Chinese since the Ming Dynasty collapsed to unify his country under a single command. Chiang Kai-shek, to whom this feat was prematurely credited, never managed it. Chiang's armies were never united and his régime at its best never controlled more than half the country. The regional warlords were never wiped out by Chiang. Today the last of them are being obliterated. Occupation of the few remaining warlord and nationalist bases, including Hainan and Formosa, is inevitable.

The revolt Mao Tse-tung leads has many precedents in Chinese history, but it has already brought about broader economic and social changes than any other upheaval in the last two thousand years. He has proved to be a military strategist without peer in China, and as shrewd a revolutionary strategist as any in the world. Lenin

"seized" power from a government that collapsed at the center. With Moscow and Petrograd behind it, the Bolshevik revolt spread to other cities and thence to the rest of the people. In China, the cities could not be "seized" from within. Mao Tse-tung accomplished the far more difficult task of organizing the people on the periphery, arming and training them, and encircling Chiang's capitals.

Ideologically as well as politically Mao is a figure of international influence. He has written pragmatic interpretations of Marxism that contain lessons of new and unpredictable consequence. He has demonstrated that Communists can secure victory without following the Soviet pattern, and indeed without any "direct support" from Russia. He is the first avowed Communist to prove that the revolution can succeed, in a backward country, with the peasantry as a main force, and without proletarian insurrections, if it wins or even "neutralizes" the majority of the middle class.

These are matters of portent. As a result, Mao and *Mao Chu-i* (or Maoism) represent quite a new force in the Communist world. For the first time Communists outside Russia have won control of a major power without giving up territorial or administrative independence, and without sacrificing their national interest to the interests of Russian chauvinism.

I first met Mao Tse-tung during the eventful summer of 1936, in the tiny walled village of Pao An, far up in the soft, tawny, loess hills of northern Shensi, near the cradle of Chinese civilization. Chiang hoped to make these hills the burial mound of his Communist opposition. Ever since 1927, he had been fighting a war to

"exterminate"—his word—the Communists, and at last triumph seemed near. The Communist bases in south China had all been smashed. The remnants of the once formidable Red Army, chased through twelve provinces on the six-thousand-mile retreat called the Long March, had crossed the tallest mountains and deepest rivers, rolling down from the marches of Tibet onto the grasslands of Kansu. They had suffered terrible losses; probably not twenty thousand gaunt survivors reached the little Red stronghold in the north. And as they regrouped in those narrow-creviced valleys, Chiang Kai-shek brought up fresh forces and renewed his plans for "final annihilation."

At that point some Chinese friends helped smuggle me through the Nationalist lines and into the Red districts, where I walked three days to come to the headquarters of Mao Tse-tung. No correspondent had yet seen him. As we sat on narrow wooden stools in the bare, mud-walled, candlelit cave in the side of a cliff that was his home, bomb shelter, library, and war office, Mao gave me more than an interview. I received lectures on ancient and modern Chinese history, on revolution, on Chinese Marxism, on the dialectics of Mao's own evolution and that of thousands of others—and a remarkable forecast of the Sino-Japanese and the great Pacific wars.

His predictions all showed vast confidence in the future, both for his followers and for China. On the surface, his position looked hopeless. Afterward, I traveled for weeks among peasants, among workers in primitive "factories," and with the Red Army at the front, and everywhere I found optimism in the leaders and warm re-