

The Cult of Mao

For the first eighteen years of the People's Republic of China, children were raised to revere Chairman Mao. He was their George Washington. In many ways, he was also considered their spiritual leader, guiding their society toward a communist utopia. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1967, the political powers behind the movement tapped into this existing respect for Mao and encouraged fanaticism, which was especially powerful among the adolescents who would later be placed at the forefront of the Cultural Revolution. The following are accounts by a twelve-year-old boy, Liang Heng. Though younger than most of the youths involved, he experienced the excitement of participating in two pilgrimages to honor Chairman Mao. The first recollection is of setting off on the "New Long March," a 240-mile hike retracing the path of the Red Army's march during the 1949 Communist Revolution.

There were eight people on our team, including Peng Ming's younger brothers and sisters and several other neighbor children, all of them much older than I. We prepared for three days, learning how to fold our things inside our blankets in a neat little square of army green, how to tie our Red Army-style straw sandals and wrap our leggings around our calves. We prepared a red flag with yellow characters in imitation-Chairman-Mao calligraphy reading "Long March," fitted placards on our bundles with Quotations so the people walking behind us could see them and take inspiration, collected a first-aid kit, a map, and canteens. My proudest moment was when Peng Ming pinned on my red armband, not a makeshift paper one, but one of finest red silk, with the shining snow-white words "Red Guard" painted onto it. Then he attached a beautiful Chairman Mao button on my jacket, a noble yellow profile with metallic red rays emanating from it and Tien An Men Square in red relief below. I think I grew ten inches. . . . Father and the other parents saw us off, anxious but not regretful, proud but afraid to show their feelings before the small gathering of onlookers. Tears were controlled on my part as well, for I was determined not to show my age. I marched proudly and quickly, without looking back even once.

The people of the Changsha streets stared at us with respect and envy, and this made us walk even taller and faster. We had soon passed through the suburbs and entered the countryside itself. Within a half a day we began to encounter other New Long March teams, some from as far away as Guangxi and Guandong provinces, and I felt prouder than ever to be from Hunan, Chairman Mao's home province and the fountainhead of the whole Communist movement. Some of these groups had better costumes than we, with real uniforms and caps with red

stars, and most of the teams were larger than ours, but our excitement and purpose were the same. We struck up an instant camaraderie, singing songs together, encouraging each other, exchanging information about what lay ahead. The walls of the peasants' houses had been painted with slogans like . . . REVOLUTION TO THE END, so we felt more than ever that we were all engaged in a common pilgrimage, that we were all part of an exalted tide being pulled inexorably toward some sacred moonlight.

By the end of 1967, eleven million young people had traveled to Peking (now called Beijing) to proclaim their loyalty to Chairman Mao. This second excerpt recounts this same boy's experiences.

If there was a single thing that meant ecstasy to everyone in those days, it was seeing Chairman Mao. Ever since I had been in Peking, the possibility had been in the back of my mind, and, like every other Red Guard, I would have laid down my life for the chance. . . . On May 1st Peng Ming was planning to go with a small group to conduct performances of Revolutionary songs at the Summer Palace during the day . . . and I was sometimes asked to carry drums and other instruments, so I went with Peng Ming's group to the park. We were completely unprepared for what happened.

In the middle of singing a song that Peng Ming had composed himself, we heard the great news: Chairman Mao was in the park! Gathering our instruments together hastily, we ran gasping to the spot, but it was too late. He was gone. All that remained of him was the touch of his hand on the hands of a few who had been lucky enough to get close to him. But we didn't leave in disappointment. That trace of precious warmth in the palms of others seemed to us a more than adequate substitute for the real thing. Those Chairman Mao had touched now became the focus of our fervor. Everyone surged toward them with outstretched arms in hopes of transferring the sacred touch to their own hands. If you couldn't get close enough for that, then shaking the hand of someone who had shaken the hands with Our Great Saving Star would have to do.

Be able to . . .

1. Explain why the people of China revered Mao and how young people would be especially involved with the cult of Mao.
2. Introduce your character to the other students, pronouncing his name correctly (as the spelling suggests), and tell what you know about this boy.
3. In your own words, describe the events explained by this boy.

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Liang Heng