

Mao Zedong: A Biography

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Leaving Home

An age-old legend tells us that 5,000 years ago Emperor Shun, while on an inspection tour of southern China, came to the Xiang river. There, while resting on a hilltop, the emperor ordered the playing of a tune called *Shao Yue* (Melody of Shao).¹ The music is said to have attracted a flock of phoenixes that danced to its lilt. From this, people began to call the hill *Shaoshan* (Mount Shao), and to call the narrow valley it embraces *Shaoshan Chong* (Shaoshan Valley), located in what is now Xiangtan County of Hunan Province.

In this same Shaoshan Valley, on 26 December 1893 (19th day of the 11th lunar month in the 19th year of Qing Dynasty Emperor Guangxu), a boy was born to the family of peasant Mao Yichang. The child was named Zedong, also to be known as Yongzhi and later as Runzhi. Two babies preceding this child had died in infancy and, fearing a likely recurrence, the mother took her newborn son to a small temple of the Stone Statue of the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin, or Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit). There, she bowed her head to the ground and asked the great rock to be the child's adoptive mother, so the boy acquired the pet name of *Shi San Yazi* (Third Kid of the Rock).

This Mao family of Shaoshan was originally from Jiangxi Province. In the early years of the Ming Dynasty, the family moved to settle in Xiangxiang County, Hunan Province. Two sons moved to Shaoshan Valley, where, in a place some 40 kilometres west from the middle reaches of the Xiang River, three Hunan counties – Xiangtan, Ningxiang and Xiangxiang – come together. It is a narrow valley, surrounded by hills, where inhabitants have lived largely by agriculture, so the Mao family engaged mainly in land reclamation and farming. Some 500 years elapsed before Mao Zedong, the twentieth generation after Mao Taihua, was born.

Despite the lovely legend of its name, the valley's conditions when Mao Zedong was born were much as in other poor, secluded areas of late imperial China. In Shaoshan Valley were more than 600 households, one being that of Mao Enpu, Mao Zedong's grandfather, an honest, kind-hearted peasant. As he

¹ *Shao* has come to mean 'beautiful' from its association with the music of the legendary Emperor Shun. It was said that Confucius was so transported by the melody's beauty that he could not eat for days.

became increasingly hard-up, he had to pawn some of his ancestral lands to sustain the family. He had only one son, Mao Zedong's father; and when he passed away, Mao Zedong was only 10 years old.

Mao Zedong's father, Mao Yichang, also known as Mao Shunsheng or Mao Liangbi, began to help manage household affairs when he was only 17 years old. Pressed by family debts, he had to leave his home village to join the local army of Hunan Province. This broadened his vision and gave him the chance to save some money. When he returned home, Mao Shunsheng first redeemed the farmland pawned by his father. Then he bought a little more land so that his holdings totalled 22 *mu* (about 1.5 hectares) that yielded about 80 *dan* (about 4 tons) of grain annually. Mao Shunsheng then turned to buying, selling and transporting rice and livestock to the markets of Xiangtan County. In this way, his wealth grew gradually to about 2–3,000 Chinese silver dollars. With this accumulated capital, he even once issued a kind of local paper money in the name of 'Mao Yishun & Co.', so in his little valley he would have been reckoned a moneybags.

In late imperial China, peasants who managed to rid themselves of poverty were invariably hardworking, frugal, clever and resolute. These characteristics of the father naturally had an important influence on Mao Zedong from his childhood. Like most peasants, Mao Shunsheng attempted to mould his sons after his own life experience, starting with household chores and field labour. From the time he was 6 years old, Mao Zedong began to do such things as weeding paddy fields, herding cattle, collecting animal dung as organic manure, chopping firewood, and the like. Later, after he learned to read, Mao Zedong began to help keep family accounts. For two years, when he was 14–15, Mao Zedong was ordered to work all day long in the fields with hired farm labourers. His father's severity made a long-lasting impression on him. Recalling those years, Mao later [in 1936] told the visiting American journalist Edgar Snow that his father was a 'severe taskmaster who, if he saw me idle or with no account-keeping to do, ordered me to do farm work. He had a hot temper and often beat me and my two younger brothers.' Mao also recollected: 'His stern attitude did me good in that I had to do farm work diligently and do the accounts with great care so as to avoid his beating or criticizing me.'² In this way, Mao learned the skills of local farm work, including ploughing and levelling paddy fields, rice-transplanting, cutting and harvesting paddy rice, and the like. The young Mao Zedong even offered to compete with hired farm labourers to take on challenging jobs. He thus acquired the finer qualities of mountain peasants: enduring hardships, defying difficulties, and having an

² Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (originally published in London by Gollancz in 1937; Chinese-language edition titled *Xixing manji*, with translation by Dong Leshan, Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1979), pp. 106–7. The pages cited hereafter refer to the Chinese-language edition.

assiduous and down-to-earth style of work. At the same time, he began to acquire a fairly deep understanding of the sufferings peasants faced.

Mao Shunsheng wanted his sons to become as accomplished at money-making as himself, and, seeing that his sons were not quite following his footsteps, he resorted to high-handed disciplinary measures. This led to inevitable confrontations between father and sons, which, for Mao Zedong, served to nurture rebelliousness from his early youth.

On the winter solstice in 1906, Mao Shunsheng hosted a banquet for his fellow businessmen. The father ordered his 13-year-old son, Mao Zedong, to wait on the guests, but the latter was loath to do so. Angry, his father scolded young Mao for being lazy and good-for-nothing, and lacking filial piety. To this, Mao Zedong retorted in front of all the guests, 'A father's kindness and his son's filial obedience go hand-in-hand' – meaning that only when 'the father is kind' can there be a 'filial son'. Enraged, and raising his fist, Mao's father threatened to beat him, whereupon Mao Zedong ran off to the edge of a huge pond and threatened to jump in should his father come any closer. Through his mother's good offices, the episode ended peacefully.

However, from this experience, Mao Zedong perceived that to yield meekly under pressure would merely invite more scolding or beating, and that only by resisting resolutely could one protect oneself.

To his father, Mao Zedong's most striking example of 'unfilial' behaviour was his refusal to accept his father's single-handed arrangement of marriage of the 14-year-old Mao Zedong to the 18-year-old daughter of a family named Luo, primarily for the purpose of adding another pair of hands to work in the household. Mao Zedong never accepted that arranged marriage and never lived with the girl as her husband. The father was helpless to do anything more about it than to enter the Luo girl's name in the formal record of the family tree only as 'Mao, née Luo'.

Compared to his father, Mao Zedong's mother, Wen Suqin, left a much greater impact on him. His mother was the seventh sister in the Wen family and her pet name was Qimei (Seventh Sister). Her parents' home was in Tangjiatuo, later called Tangguige, in Xiangxiang County on the other side of the mountain and about 10 *li* (5 km) from Shaoshan Valley. The Wen family, also peasants, was well-off. At the age of 18, Wen Qimei was married to Mao Shunsheng, to whom she bore five boys and two girls. Four of the children died in infancy, and three brothers survived: Mao Zedong, Mao Zemin and Mao Zetan.

Like many other country women, Mao's mother spent her time quietly attending to household chores and bringing up children. She was gentle, kind-hearted, and had a strong sense of sympathy. In years of famine, she would send rice to the starving without the knowledge of her husband. She also would often go to Buddhist temples to pray and worship Buddha piously. She instilled her children with beliefs in 'accumulating virtue and doing good' and 'karma

and retribution'. Once, when Mao Zedong was about 9 years old, he even discussed earnestly with her how to persuade his father to believe in Buddha. When his mother fell ill, the 15-year-old Mao made a special trip to the holy temple on Mount Heng to pray for his mother's speedy recovery.³ This shows the impact that his mother's teaching by example had on the teenaged Mao, who then had not much understanding of Buddhist doctrines.

Indeed, his mother's teaching by words and deeds helped make Mao Zedong, from his early youth, sympathetic towards the poor and weak in their sufferings, and willing to help others in times of need.

Once, a nearby peasant, also surnamed Mao, had received from Mao Zedong's father a deposit of money to buy some pigs at an agreed price. Later, when Mao Zedong was sent by his father to collect the pigs, the price for pigs had gone up considerably. The peasant sighed repeatedly, blamed his own ill fate, and opined that several silver dollars were nothing to a well-off man, but that it was a big loss to a poor fellow's household. Upon hearing this, Mao Zedong cancelled his father's deal for the pigs.

On another occasion, when Mao was 11, his father wanted to buy 7 *mu* (about 1 acre) of farmland from cousin Mao Jusheng, who depended on that land for a living and was then faced with great difficulties. Both Mao Zedong and his mother agreed the right thing to do was to help Mao Jusheng ride out his difficulties instead of seizing the chance to buy his only bit of farmland. Mao's father thought otherwise, insisting it was perfectly all right to buy the land with a cash payment. Efforts at dissuasion by Mao and his mother were to no avail, but the incident left a deep impression. Decades later, when recalling this on various occasions after the founding of the People's Republic, Mao Zedong told Mao Zelian (son of Mao Jusheng): 'The private ownership system in old China made brothers and cousins forget fraternity, to such an extent that father refused to listen to any persuasion, insisted on buying the 7 *mu* of land, and cared only for making money.'⁴

Mao Zedong had a deep affection for his mother. In the summer of 1918, on the eve of leaving Changsha for Beijing, Mao was so worried about his mother, who was recuperating from illness at his maternal grandmother's home, that he obtained a medical prescription and then entrusted his uncle to carry it to his mother. The following spring, after returning to Changsha, Mao brought his mother to the provincial capital for medical treatment. She died on 5 October 1919, at age 52, from scrofula, then customarily referred to simply as 'herniated neck'. On hearing the sad news, Mao sped back to

³ Mount Heng in Hunan Province, the southernmost of China's so-called 'five sacred mountains'.

⁴ Mao Zelian's recollections (February 1973) in Gao Jucun *et al.*, *Qingnian Mao Zedong* (Mao Zedong in his Youth) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1990), p. 8.

Shaoshan to keep vigil beside the coffin. On that occasion, Mao Zedong wrote an affectionate ‘Elegy for Mother’ in four-character lines:

Mother’s virtues are many, and
 Outstanding is her universal love.
 She extended to so many,
 Whether acquainted with her or not,
 Her kind and sympathetic heart,
 That folks are deeply moved.
 Her affection is powerful
 As it originated in sincerity.
 She never boasted, and
 Never attempted to
 cheat . . . Held in high
 esteem
 Her integrity is untainted.

In a letter to Zou Yunzhen, a schoolmate, Mao at that time wrote: ‘There are three kinds of people in the world, those who harm others to benefit themselves, those who benefit themselves without harming others, and those who benefit others at the cost of their own losses; and my mother is one of the third kind.’ Indeed, Mao’s mother’s influence on him was keenly felt throughout his life.



Figure 1 Mao Zedong’s parents: Mao Shunsheng (1870–1920) and Wen Suqin (1867–1919)

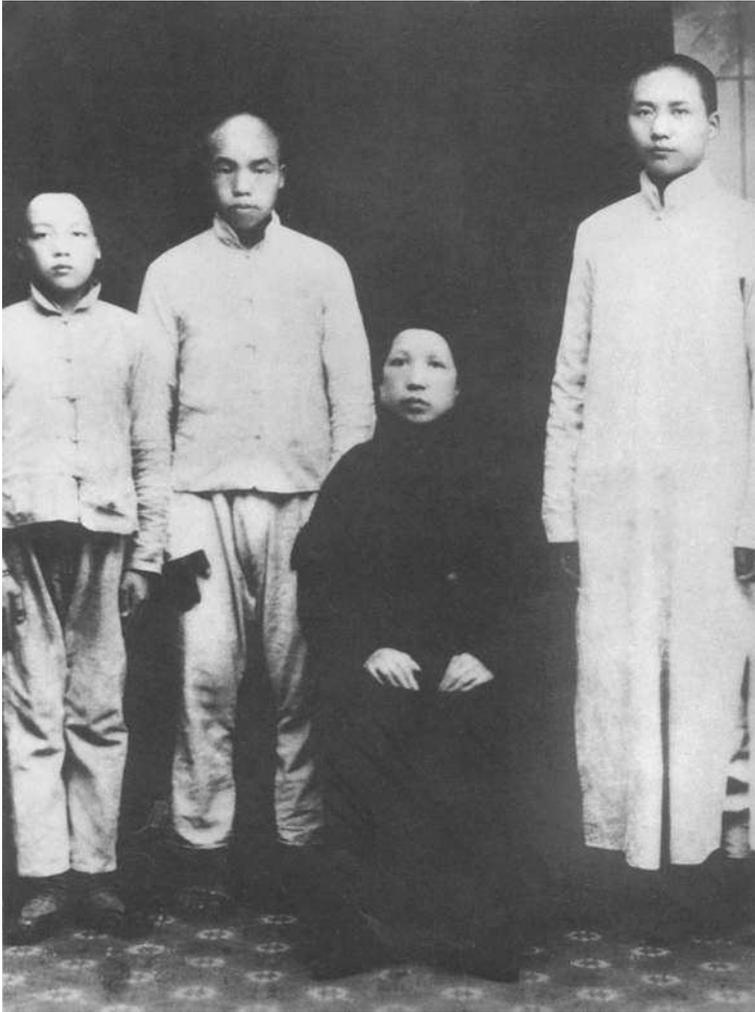


Figure 2 Mao Zedong (extreme right), Mao Zemin (third from right) and Mao Zetan with their mother in Changsha in 1919

After his mother's passing, Mao Zedong invited his father, Mao Shunsheng, to stay with him for a time in Changsha. His father no longer interfered with his life, but agreed to continue financial support for his schooling. For this, Mao Zedong was grateful to his father, who died from acute typhoid at the age of 50, on 23 January 1920.

While parental education usually has a great bearing on a child's growth, schooling invariably has an impact on a child's future course of development.

Mao Zedong spent much of his early childhood at his maternal grandmother's home in Tangjiatuo in Xiangxiang County, where his maternal grandfather was engaged in farming. His mother's brother ran an old-style private school and taught local children. Mao often attended classes at that school until 1902, when he was 8 years old and was brought back to Shaoshan Valley, where he began learning at a nearby old-style private school. In the eight years that ensued, excepting the two years when he was required by his father to work at farming the family's land, Mao attended six different private schools in the nearby localities of Nan'an, Guangongqiao, Qiaotouwan, Zhongjiawan, Jingwanli, Wuguijing and Dongmaotang. In retrospect, Mao summed up those years as 'six years of reading Confucian books'.⁵ Even then, he still helped with farming, collecting animal dung in the early morning and late afternoon, and joining in the work at harvest time.

By that time, the imperial examination system had in the main been abolished, and modern schools had begun to emerge. Introducing Western literature and going abroad to Japan for studies were in vogue. By the time Mao Zedong began to receive elementary schooling, the two people he admired – Yang Changji, who was to become his teacher, and the great man of letters Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren) – had left for Japan for advanced studies. In Shaoshan Valley, the old-style private schools were then still the only choice for local children's schooling. By sending Mao to school, his father cherished no high hopes beyond his son's acquiring enough literacy to keep family accounts and to be prepared for lawsuits if necessary. Following the custom of the time, Mao Zedong began with popular readings of traditional Confucian literature, such as *San Zi Jing* (The 3-Character Classic), *Bai Jia Xing* (The Hundred Surnames, in rhythmic arrangement – actually totalling more than 500 surnames), *Zengguang Xianwen* (Wise Sayings to Broaden One's Horizon) and *Youxue Qionglin* (Selected Readings for Children). After these, Mao began to study the *Si Shu* (Four Books) and *Wu Jing* (Five Classics).⁶ The original copies of *The Book of Songs* and *The Analects of Confucius* that Mao read are today on display at the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall in Shaoshan.

Though Mao did not find the difficult classical works to his liking, he had an extraordinary memory and comprehension, and was able to learn them well and by heart. Indeed, once committed to memory, what one has learnt in childhood cannot be erased from one's mind. That is why Mao could apply these works easily long after he grew to manhood. Mao also studied the *Zuo Zhuan* (Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals), and that led to his

⁵ Mao Zedong's talks to philosophy workers at Beidaihe, 18 August 1964.

⁶ The *Si Shu* (Four Books) consist of *Da Xue* (Great Learning), *Zhong Yong* (Doctrine of the Mean), *Lun Yu* (Analects of Confucius) and *Meng Zi* (Mencius). The *Wu Jing* (Five Classics) consist of *Shi Jing* (Book of Songs), *Shu Jing* (Book of History), *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes), *Li Jing* (Book of Rites) and *Chun Qiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals).

great interest in studying history. His six-year education in Confucian culture helped cultivate his enthusiasm for ‘taking history as a clue to the present’, and it also helped develop his later approach of ‘making the past serve the present’.

In his early youth, Mao Zedong did believe in the exhortations of Confucius and Mencius, but the old-style, private school teachers’ stereotyped way of instruction had little in it to attract him. In 1908, when attending the private school at Jingwanli, he had a particular interest in reading what the teachers branded as ‘frivolous books’ or ‘trash books’ – such famous novels as *The Water Margin*, *Journey to the West*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Biography of Yue Fei* (the patriotic general) and *Romances of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*. As the teacher did not approve of reading these books, he had to read them on the sly, putting a text-book over them as a cover-up when he was in school. At home, since his father did not allow him to read such books, Mao Zedong had to cover up his window so that his father could not see the lamp light inside his son’s room.

Once he had read these novels and romances, Mao Zedong would recount the stories to other children or to the elderly folk of the village. Much later, in retrospect, Mao told Edgar Snow [in 1936]: ‘It occurred to me one day that there was one peculiar thing about those stories – the absence of peasants who tilled the land. All the characters in those stories were warriors, officials, or scholars; never was there a peasant hero.’ As a peasant’s son, Mao Zedong felt puzzled for some time, and he began to analyse those novels and concluded that the heroes in them ‘did not have to work the land because they owned and controlled the land and evidently made the peasants work it for them’.⁷ Mao felt that this was a case of inequality.

Peasants were naturally opposed to such inequality, and the rebellious figures depicted in *The Water Margin* became real heroes in Mao’s mind. The influence of this notion was meaningful and far-reaching. Later, in the long years of hardship in his revolutionary life, *The Water Margin* was a book he always kept handy for reading.

The incidents in these novels that attracted Mao Zedong’s attention were reflected in events that occurred in real life. A rebellion staged by a starving mob erupted in Changsha in April 1910. It was a year of famine in which food prices soared unusually high, and whole families committed suicide. A large number of hungry people gathered at the gate to the governor’s office to present petitions, but they were shot at, and fourteen of the petitioners were killed instantly, with many more wounded. Such an act of suppression was too much for the masses to tolerate, and they set fire to the governor’s office and smashed the offices of some foreign firms, shipping companies and the customs board. The Qing government sent in more troops to suppress the rioters, killing so many that the Shiziling area outside the Liuyang Gate of the

⁷ Snow, *Red Star over China*, p. 109.