



**Mao Tse-tung**

**A SINGLE SPARK  
CAN START A PRAIRIE FIRE**

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## A SINGLE SPARK CAN START A PRAIRIE FIRE<sup>□</sup>

*January 5, 1930*

Some comrades in our Party still do not know how to appraise the current situation correctly and how to settle the attendant question of what action to take. Though they believe that a revolutionary high tide is inevitable, they do not believe it to be imminent. Therefore, they disapprove of the plan to take Kiangsi and only approve of roving guerrilla actions in the three areas on the borders of Fukien, Kwangtung and Kiangsi; at the same time, as they do not have a deep understanding of what it means to establish Red political power in the guerrilla areas, they do not have a deep understanding of the idea of accelerating the nation-wide revolutionary high tide through the consolidation and expansion of Red political power. They seem to think that, since the revolutionary high tide is still remote, it will be labour lost to attempt to establish political power by hard work. Instead, they want to extend our political influence through the easier method of roving guerrilla actions, and, once the masses throughout the country have been won over, or more or less won over, they want to launch a nation-wide armed insurrection which, with the participation of the Red Army, would become a great nation-wide revolution. Their theory that we must first win over the masses on a country-wide scale and in all regions and then establish political power does not accord with the actual state of the Chinese revolution. This theory derives mainly from the failure to understand clearly that China is a semi-colonial country for which many imperialist powers are contending. If one clearly understands this, one will understand first why the unusual phenomenon of prolonged and tangled warfare within the ruling classes is only to be found in China, why this warfare is steadily growing fiercer and spreading, and why

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\* This was a letter written by Comrade Mao Tse-tung in criticism of certain pessimistic views then existing in the Party.

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there has never been a unified regime. Secondly, one will understand the gravity of the peasant problem and hence why rural uprisings have developed on the present country-wide scale. Thirdly, one will understand the correctness of the slogan of workers' and peasants' democratic political power. Fourthly, one will understand another unusual phenomenon, which is also absent outside China, and which follows from the first (that in China alone there is prolonged and tangled warfare within the ruling classes), namely, the existence and development of the Red Army and the guerrilla forces, and together with them, the existence and development of small Red areas encircled by the White regime. Fifthly, one will understand that in semi-colonial China the establishment and expansion of the Red Army, the guerrilla forces and the Red areas is the highest form of peasant struggle under the leadership of the proletariat, the inevitable outcome of the growth of the semi-colonial peasant struggle, and undoubtedly the most important factor in

accelerating the revolutionary high tide throughout the country. And sixthly, one will also understand that the policy which merely calls for roving guerrilla actions cannot accomplish the task of accelerating this nation-wide revolutionary high tide, while the kind of policy adopted by Chu Teh and Mao Tse-tung and also by Fang Chih-min<sup>[1]</sup> is undoubtedly correct -- that is, the policy of establishing base areas; of systematically setting up political power; of deepening the agrarian revolution; of expanding the people's armed forces by a comprehensive process of building up first the township Red Guards, then the district Red Guards, then the county Red Guards, then the local Red Army troops, all the way up to the regular Red Army troops, of spreading political power by advancing in a series of waves, etc., etc. Only thus is it possible to build the confidence of the revolutionary masses throughout the country, as the Soviet Union has built it throughout the world. Only thus is it possible to create tremendous difficulties for the reactionary ruling classes, shake their foundations and hasten their internal disintegration. Only thus is it really possible to create a Red Army which will become the chief weapon for the great revolution of the future. In short, only thus is it possible to hasten the revolutionary high tide.

Comrades who suffer from revolutionary impetuosity overestimate the subjective forces of the revolution<sup>[2]</sup> and underestimate the forces of the counter-revolution. Such an appraisal stems mainly from subjectivism. In the end, it undoubtedly leads to putschism. On the other

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hand, underestimating the subjective forces of the revolution and overestimating the forces of the counter-revolution would also constitute an improper appraisal and be certain to produce bad results of another kind. Therefore, in judging the political situation in China it is necessary to understand the following:

1. Although the subjective forces of the revolution in China are now weak, so also are all organizations (organs of political power, armed forces, political parties, etc.) of the reactionary ruling classes, resting as they do on the backward and fragile social and economic structure of China. This helps to explain why revolution cannot break out at once in the countries of Western Europe where, although the subjective forces of revolution are now perhaps somewhat stronger than in China, the forces of the reactionary ruling classes are many times stronger. In China the revolution will undoubtedly move towards a high tide more rapidly, for although the subjective forces of the revolution at present are weak, the forces of the counter-revolution are relatively weak too.

2. The subjective forces of the revolution have indeed been greatly weakened since the defeat of the revolution in 1927. The remaining forces are very small and those comrades who judge by appearances alone naturally feel pessimistic. But if we judge by essentials, it is quite another story. Here we can apply the old Chinese saying, "A single spark can start a prairie fire." In other words, our forces, although small at present, will grow very rapidly. In the conditions prevailing in China, their growth is not only possible but indeed inevitable, as the May 30th Movement and the Great Revolution which followed have fully proved. When we look at a thing, we must examine its essence and treat its appearance merely as an usher at the threshold, and once we cross the threshold, we must grasp the essence of the thing; this is the only reliable and scientific method of analysis.

3. Similarly, in appraising the counter-revolutionary forces, we must never look merely at their appearance, but should examine their essence. In the initial period of our independent regime in the Hunan-Kiangsi border area, some comrades genuinely believed the incorrect appraisal made by the Hunan Provincial Committee and regarded the class enemy as not worth a rap; the two descriptive terms, "terribly shaky" and "extremely panicky", which are standing jokes to this day, were used by the Hunan Provincial Committee at the time (from May to June 1928) in appraising the Hunan ruler

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Lu Ti-ping.<sup>[3]</sup> Such an appraisal necessarily led to putschism in the political sphere. But during the four months from November of that year to February 1929 (before the war between Chiang Kai-shek and the Kwangsi warlords),<sup>[4]</sup> when the enemy's third "joint suppression expedition"<sup>[5]</sup> was approaching the Chingkuang Mountains, some comrades asked the question, "How long can we keep the Red Flag flying?" As a matter of fact, the struggle in China between Britain, the United States and Japan had by then become quite open, and a state of tangled warfare between Chiang Kai-shek, the Kwangsi clique and Feng Yu-hsiang was taking shape; hence it was actually the time when the counter-revolutionary tide had begun to ebb and the revolutionary tide to rise again. Yet pessimistic ideas were to be found not only in the Red Army and local Party organizations; even the Central Committee was misled by appearances and adopted a pessimistic tone. Its February letter is evidence of the pessimistic analysis made in the Party at that time.

4. The objective situation today is still such that comrades who see only the superficial appearance and not the essence of what is before them are liable to be misled. In particular, when our comrades working in the Red Army are defeated in battle or encircled or pursued by strong enemy forces, they often unwittingly generalize and exaggerate their momentary, specific and limited situation, as though the situation in China and the world as a whole gave no cause for optimism and the prospects of victory for the revolution were remote. The reason they seize on the appearance and brush aside the essence in their observation of things is that they have not made a scientific analysis of the essence of the overall situation. The question whether there will soon be a revolutionary high tide in China can be decided only by making a detailed examination to ascertain whether the contradictions leading to a revolutionary high tide are really developing. Since contradictions are developing in the world between the imperialist countries, between the imperialist countries and their colonies, and between the imperialists and the proletariat in their own countries, there is an intensified need for the imperialists to contend for the domination of China. While the imperialist contention over China becomes more intense, both the contradiction between imperialism and the whole Chinese nation and the contradictions among the imperialists themselves develop simultaneously on Chinese soil, thereby creating the tangled warfare which is expanding and intensifying daily and giving rise to the continuous development of

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the contradictions among the different cliques of China's reactionary rulers. In the wake of the contradictions among the reactionary ruling cliques -- the tangled warfare among the warlords -- comes heavier taxation, which steadily sharpens the contradiction between the broad masses of taxpayers and the reactionary rulers. In the wake of the contradiction

between imperialism and China's national industry comes the failure of the Chinese industrialists to obtain concessions from the imperialists, which sharpens the contradiction between the Chinese bourgeoisie and the Chinese working class, with the Chinese capitalists trying to find a way out by frantically exploiting the workers and with the workers resisting. In the wake of imperialist commercial aggression, Chinese merchant-capitalist extortions, heavier government taxation, etc., comes the deepening of the contradiction between the landlord class and the peasantry, that is, exploitation through rent and usury is aggravated and the hatred of the peasants for the landlords grows. Because of the pressure of foreign goods, the exhaustion of the purchasing power of the worker and peasant masses, and the increase in government taxation, more and more dealers in Chinese-made goods and independent producers are being driven into bankruptcy. Because the reactionary government, though short of provisions and funds, endlessly expands its armies and thus constantly extends the warfare, the masses of soldiers are in a constant state of privation. Because of the growth in government taxation, the rise in rent and interest demanded by the landlords and the daily spread of the disasters of war, there are famine and banditry everywhere and the peasant masses and the urban poor can hardly keep alive. Because the schools have no money, many students fear that their education may be interrupted; because production is backward, many graduates have no hope of employment. Once we understand all these contradictions, we shall see in what a desperate situation, in what a chaotic state, China finds herself. We shall also see that the high tide of revolution against the imperialists, the warlords and the landlords is inevitable, and will come very soon. All China is littered with dry faggots which will soon be aflame. The saying, "A single spark can start a prairie fire", is an apt description of how the current situation will develop. We need only look at the strikes by the workers, the uprisings by the peasants, the mutinies of soldiers and the strikes of students which are developing in many places to see that it cannot be long before a "spark" kindles "a prairie fire".

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The gist of the above was already contained in the letter from the Front Committee to the Central Committee on April 5, 1929, which reads in part:

The Central Committee's letter [dated February 9, 1929] makes too pessimistic an appraisal of the objective situation and our subjective forces. The Kuomintang's three "suppression" campaigns against the Chingkang Mountains was the high water mark reached by the counter-revolutionary tide. But there it stopped, and since then the counter-revolutionary tide has gradually receded while the revolutionary tide has gradually risen. Although our Party's fighting capacity and organizational strength have been weakened to the extent described by the Central Committee, they will be rapidly restored, and the passivity among comrades in the Party will quickly disappear as the counter-revolutionary tide gradually ebbs. The masses will certainly come over to us. The Kuomintang's policy of massacre only serves to "drive the fish into deep waters",<sup>[6]</sup> as the saying goes, and reformism no longer has any mass appeal. It is certain that the masses will soon shed their illusions about the Kuomintang. In the emerging situation, no other party will be able to compete with the Communist Party in winning over the masses. The political line and the organizational line laid down by the Party's Sixth National Congress<sup>[7]</sup> are correct, *i.e.*, the revolution at the present stage is democratic and not socialist, and the present task of the Party [here the words "in the big cities" should

have been added]<sup>[8]</sup> is to win over the masses and not to stage immediate insurrections. Nevertheless the revolution will develop swiftly, and we should take a positive attitude in our propaganda and preparations for armed insurrections. In the present chaotic situation we can lead the masses only by positive slogans and a positive attitude. Only by taking such an attitude can the Party recover its fighting capacity. . . . Proletarian leadership is the sole key to victory in the revolution. Building a proletarian foundation for the Party and setting up Party branches in industrial enterprises in key districts are important organizational tasks for the Party at present; but at the same time the major prerequisites for helping the struggle in the cities and hastening the rise of the revolutionary tide are specifically the development of the struggle in the countryside, the establishment of Red political power in small areas, and

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the creation and expansion of the Red Army. Therefore, it would be wrong to abandon the struggle in the cities, but in our opinion it would also be wrong for any of our Party members to fear the growth of peasant strength lest it should outstrip the workers' strength and harm the revolution. For in the revolution in semi-colonial China, the peasant struggle must always fail if it does not have the leadership of the workers, but the revolution is never harmed if the peasant struggle outstrips the forces of the workers.

The letter also contained the following reply on the question of the Red Army's operational tactics:

To preserve the Red Army and arouse the masses, the Central Committee asks us to divide our forces into very small units and disperse them over the countryside and to withdraw Chu Teh and Mao Tse-tung from the army, so concealing the major targets. This is an unrealistic view. In the winter of 1927-28, we did plan to disperse our forces over the countryside, with each company or battalion operating on its own and adopting guerrilla tactics in order to arouse the masses while trying not to present a target for the enemy; we have tried this out many times, but have failed every time. The reasons are: (1) most of the soldiers in the main force of the Red Army come from other areas and have a background different from that of the local Red Guards; (2) division into small units results in weak leadership and inability to cope with adverse circumstances, which easily leads to defeat; (3) the units are liable to be crushed by the enemy one by one; (4) the more adverse the circumstances, the greater the need for concentrating our forces and for the leaders to be resolute in struggle, because only thus can we have internal unity against the enemy. Only in favourable circumstances is it advisable to divide our forces for guerrilla operations, and it is only then that the leaders need not stay with the ranks all the time, as they must in adverse circumstances.

The weakness of this passage is that the reasons adduced against the division of forces were of a negative character, which was far from adequate. The positive reason for concentrating our forces is that only concentration will enable us to wipe out comparatively large enemy units and occupy towns. Only after we have wiped out comparatively large enemy units and occupied towns can we arouse the

masses on a broad scale and set up political power extending over a number of adjoining counties. Only thus can we make a widespread impact (what we call "extending our political influence"), and contribute effectively to speeding the day of the revolutionary high tide. For instance, both the regime we set up in the Hunan-Kiangsi border area the year before last and the one we set up in western Fukien last year<sup>[9]</sup> were the product of this policy of concentrating our troops. This is a general principle. But are there not times when our forces should be divided up? Yes, there are. The letter from the Front Committee to the Central Committee says of guerrilla tactics for the Red Army, including the division of forces within a short radius:

The tactics we have derived from the struggle of the past three years are indeed different from any other tactics, ancient or modern, Chinese or foreign. With our tactics, the masses can be aroused for struggle on an ever-broadening scale, and no enemy, however powerful, can cope with us. Ours are guerrilla tactics. They consist mainly of the following points:

"Divide our forces to arouse the masses, concentrate our forces to deal with the enemy."

"The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue."

"To extend stable base areas,<sup>[10]</sup> employ the policy of advancing in waves; when pursued by a powerful enemy, employ the policy of circling around."

"Arouse the largest numbers of the masses in the shortest possible time and by the best possible methods."

These tactics are just like casting a net; at any moment we should be able to cast it or draw it in. We cast it wide to win over the masses and draw it in to deal with the enemy. Such are the tactics we have used for the past three years.

Here, "to cast the net wide" means to divide our forces within a short radius. For example, when we first captured the county town of Yunghsin in the Hunan-Kiangsi border area, we divided the forces of the 29th and 31st Regiments within the boundaries of Yunghsin County. Again, when we captured Yunghsin for the third time, we once more divided our forces by dispatching the 28th Regiment to the border of Anfu County, the 29th to Lienhua, and the 31st to the border of Kian County. And, again, we divided our forces in the counties of southern Kiangsi last April and May, and in the counties

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of western Fukien last July. As to dividing our forces over a wide radius, it is possible only on the two conditions that circumstances are comparatively favourable and the leading bodies fairly strong. For the purpose of dividing up our forces is to put us in a better position for winning over the masses, for deepening the agrarian revolution and establishing political power, and for expanding the Red Army and the local armed units. It is better not to divide our forces when this purpose cannot be attained or the division of our forces would lead to defeat and to the weakening of the Red Army, as happened in August two years ago when our forces were divided on the Hunan-Kiangsi border for an attack on Chenchou. But there is no doubt that, given the two above-mentioned conditions, we should divide our forces, because division is then more advantageous than concentration.

The Central Committee's February letter was not in the right spirit and had a bad effect on a number of Party comrades in the Fourth Army. At that time the Central Committee also issued a circular stating that war would not necessarily break out between Chiang Kai-shek and the Kwangsi warlords. Since then, however, the appraisals and directives of the Central Committee have in the main been correct. It has already issued another circular correcting the one containing the wrong appraisal. Although it has not made any correction of the letter to the Red Army, its subsequent directives have not been couched in the same pessimistic tone and its views on the Red Army's operations now coincide with ours. Yet the bad effect which this letter had on some comrades persists. Therefore, I feel that it is still necessary to give some explanation.

The plan to take Kiangsi Province within a year was also proposed last April by the Front Committee to the Central Committee, and a decision to that effect was later made at Yutu. The following reasons were given in the letter to the Central Committee:

The armies of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kwangsi warlords are approaching each other in the vicinity of Kiukiang, and a big battle is imminent. The resumption of mass struggle, coupled with the spread of contradictions among the ruling reactionaries, makes it probable that there will soon be a high tide of revolution. As for how our work should be arranged under these circumstances, we feel that, so far as the southern provinces are concerned, the armed forces of the compradors and landlords in Kwangtung and Hunan Provinces are too strong, and that in Hunan, more

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over, we have lost almost all our mass following, inside as well as outside the Party, because of the Party's putschist mistakes. In the three provinces of Fukien, Kiangsi and Chekiang, however, the situation is different. First, militarily the enemy is weakest there. In Chekiang, there is only a small provincial force under Chiang Po-cheng.<sup>[11]</sup> In Fukien, although there are five groups of enemy troops totalling fourteen regiments in all, Kuo Feng-ming's troops have already been smashed; the troops under Chen Kuo-hui and Lu Hsing-pang<sup>[12]</sup> are bandits of small fighting capacity; the two brigades of marines stationed along the coast have never seen action and their fighting capacity is undoubtedly not high; Chang Chen<sup>[13]</sup> alone can put up some sort of a fight, but, according to an analysis made by the Fukien Provincial Committee, even he has only two relatively strong regiments. In addition, Fukien is now in a state of complete chaos, confusion and disunity. In Kiangsi, there are sixteen regiments under the two commands of Chu Pei-teh<sup>[14]</sup> and Hsiung Shih-hui;<sup>[15]</sup> they are stronger than the armed forces of either Fukien or Chekiang, but far inferior to those of Hunan. Secondly, fewer putschist mistakes have been made in these three provinces. We are not clear about the situation in Chekiang, but the Party's organizational and mass base is somewhat better in Kiangsi and Fukien than in Hunan. Take Kiangsi for example. In northern Kiangsi we still have some basis in Tehan, Hsiushui and Tungku; in western Kiangsi the Party and the Red Guards still have some strength in Ningkang, Yunghsin, Lienhua and Suichuan; in southern Kiangsi the prospects are still brighter, as the 2nd and 4th Regiments of the Red Army are steadily growing in strength in the counties of Kian, Yungfeng and Hsingkuo; and what is more, the Red Army under Fang Chih-min has by no means been wiped out. All this places

us in a position to close in on Nanchang. We hereby recommend to the Central Committee that during the period of prolonged warfare among the Kuomintang warlords, we should contend with Chiang Kai-shek and the Kwangsi clique for Kiangsi Province and also for western Fukien and western Chekiang. In these three provinces we should enlarge the Red Army and create an independent regime of the masses, with a time limit of one year for accomplishing this plan.

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This proposal to contend for Kiangsi erred only in setting a time limit of one year. It was based not only on conditions within the province itself, but also on the prospect that a nation-wide high tide of revolution would soon arise. For unless we had been convinced that there would soon be a high tide of revolution, we could not possibly have concluded that we could take Kiangsi in a year. The only weakness in the proposal was that it set a time limit of one year, which it should not have done, and so gave a flavour of impetuosity to the word "soon" in the statement, "there will soon be a high tide of revolution". As to the subjective and objective conditions in Kiangsi, they well deserve our attention. Besides the subjective conditions described in the letter to the Central Committee, three objective conditions can now be clearly pointed out. First, the economy of Kiangsi is mainly feudal, the merchant-capitalist class is relatively weak, and the armed forces of the landlords are weaker than in any other southern province. Secondly, Kiangsi has no provincial troops of its own and has always been garrisoned by troops from other provinces. Sent there for the "suppression of Communists" or "suppression of bandits", these troops are unfamiliar with local conditions, their interests are much less directly involved than if they were local troops, and they usually lack enthusiasm. And thirdly, unlike Kwangtung which is close to Hongkong and under British control in almost every respect, Kiangsi is comparatively remote from imperialist influence. Once we have grasped these three points, we can understand why rural uprisings are more widespread and the Red Army and guerrilla units more numerous in Kiangsi than in any other province.

How then should we interpret the word "soon" in the statement, "there will soon be a high tide of revolution"? This is a common question among comrades. Marxists are not fortune-tellers. They should, and indeed can, only indicate the general direction of future developments and changes; they should not and cannot fix the day and the hour in a mechanistic way. But when I say that there will soon be a high tide of revolution in China, I am emphatically not speaking of something which in the words of some people "is possibly coming", something illusory, unattainable and devoid of significance for action. It is like a ship far out at sea whose mast-head can already be seen from the shore; it is like the morning sun in the east whose shimmering rays are visible from a high mountain top; it is like a child about to be born moving restlessly in its mother's womb.

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## NOTES

[1] Comrade Fang Chih-min, a native of Yiyang, Kiangsi Province, and a member of the Sixth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, was the founder of the Red area in northeastern Kiangsi and of the Tenth Red Army. In 1934 he led the vanguard detachment of the Red Army in marching north to resist the Japanese invaders. In January 1935 he was captured in battle against the counter-revolutionary Kuomintang troops and in July he died a martyr's death in Nanchang, Kiangsi. [p. 118]

[2] The subjective forces of the revolution mean the organized forces of the revolution. [p. 118]

[3] Lu Ti-ping, a Kuomintang warlord, was the Kuomintang governor of Hunan Province in 1928. [p. 120]

[4] The war of March-April 1929 between Chiang Kai-shek, the Kuomintang warlord in Nanking, and Li Tsung-jen and Pai Chung-hsi, the Kuomintang warlords in Kwangsi Province. [p. 120]

[5] The third invasion of the Red Army's base area on the Ching-kang Mountains by the Kuomintang warlords in Hunan and Kiangsi lasting from the end of 1928 to the beginning of 1929. [p. 120]

[6] The quotation is from Mencius, who compared a tyrant who drove his people into seeking a benevolent ruler to the otter which "drives the fish into deep waters". [p. 122]

[7] The Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of China was held in July 1928. It pointed out that after the defeat in 1927, China's revolution remained bourgeois-democratic in nature, *i.e.*, anti-imperialist and anti-feudal, and that since the inevitable new high tide in the revolution was not yet imminent, the general line for the revolution should be to win over the masses. The Sixth Congress liquidated the 1927 Right capitulationism of Chen Tu-hsiu and also repudiated the "Left" putschism which occurred in the Party at the end of 1927 and the beginning of 1928. [p. 122]

[8] The statement in brackets has been added by the author. [p. 122]

[9] The regime set up in western Fukien came into being in 1929, when the Red Army in the Ching-kang Mountains sallied eastward to build a new revolutionary base area and established the people's revolutionary political power in the counties of Lungyen, Yungting and Shanghang in the western part of that province. [p. 124]

[10] Stable base areas were the relatively stable revolutionary base areas established by the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. [p. 124]

[11] Chiang Po-cheng was then the commander of the Kuomintang peace preservation corps in Chekiang Province. [p. 126]

[12] Chen Kuo-hui and Lu Hsing-pang were two notorious Fukien bandits whose forces had been incorporated into the Kuomintang army. [p. 126]

[13] Chang Chen was a divisional commander of the Kuomintang army. [p. 126]

[14] Chu Pei-teh, a Kuomintang warlord, was then the Kuomintang governor of Kiangsi Province. [p. 126]

[15] Hsiung Shih-hui was then a divisional commander of the Kuomintang army in Kiangsi Province. [p. 126]