

EXCURSUS II

Lawrence Nevins on Mao Swimming

July 16, 1976, marks the tenth anniversary of the day Chairman Mao Tse-tung entered the turbulent waters of the great Yangtse at Wuhan for the most celebrated immersion since John the Baptist. Dr. Han Su-Yin claims it was an appropriate prelude to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. "The act was symbolic; for the Cultural Revolution would be a flood, sweeping away many accepted symbols, renewing the freshness of revolution, renewing his own youthful exploits through yet another generation of rebels."

The *Peking Review*, ordinarily a splendid cure for insomnia, published in the issue of July 29, 1966, two pieces on the subject worthy of meditation. Like a cool dip on a hot day, it is the kind of writing that restores homeostasis, stabilizes blood pressure, oxygenates the blood, massages the vital organs, and produces a refreshing feeling of general well-being.

Chairman Mao Tse-tung, our great leader, once again had a good swim in the Yangtse River, braving the wind and waves on July 16.

The sky over Wuhan that day was bright and clear. Tens of thousands of people, ebullient with joy, thronged both banks of the river.

Chairman Mao had swum across the Yangtse at Wuhan three times in June, 1956, and had written his magnificent and powerful poem *Swimming*—to the melody *Shui Tiao Keh Tou*. Ten years later, Chairman Mao again swam in the great river, staying in the water for 65 minutes and covering a distance of nearly 15 kilometers. It was as Chairman Mao had said in his poem:

"I care not that the wind blows and the waves beat;
It is better than idly strolling in a courtyard."

The happy news about Chairman Mao's latest swim in the Yangtse soon spread all over Wuhan. Filled with great joy, the people of this triple city, men and women and old and young, passed on the word: "Our respected and beloved leader Chairman Mao is so very healthy. This is the greatest happiness for the entire Chinese people and for the revolutionary people of the whole world!"

It was a great day in old Wuhan. Five thousand swimmers, we are told, participated in the Eleventh Cross-Yangtse Swimming Competition. Cheering throngs lined banks decorated with colorful banners and huge posters, while loudspeakers broadcast the stirring strains of *The East Is Red*. The arrival of the

great man himself aboard a launch unleashed a pandemonium of cheers and ship whistles.

Radiant with vigor and in buoyant spirits, Chairman Mao stood on the deck and reviewed the large number of swimmers battling the waves. At that moment, the swimmers formed a Great Wall on the wide river, cleft the waves and valiantly forged ahead, some holding red banners high and others advancing with big boards inscribed with quotations from Chairman Mao's works which read: "Unity, alertness, earnestness and liveliness"; "The imperialists are bullying us in such a manner that we shall have to deal with them seriously"; "Be resolute and unafraid of sacrifice, surmount every difficulty to win victory." Chairman Mao was filled with great joy to see that the swimmers were fired with such revolutionary spirit, so firm in their determination and so strong in their fighting will. Now walking to the starboard and now to the port side, he waved to the swimmers amid enthusiastic cheers and called out to them in a loud voice: "Greetings, comrades! Long live you comrades!"

Over two hundred grade-school students paddled by supporting a board with Chairman Mao's brilliant epigram: "Study diligently and make progress every day." As they swam, they sang the catchy ditty, "We Are Successors to the Cause of Communism." The great helmsman ordered the launch to approach the swimming Young Pioneers. "Long live Chairman Mao," the aquatic tykes enthusiastically piped. Chairman Mao magnanimously waved and said "Greetings children."

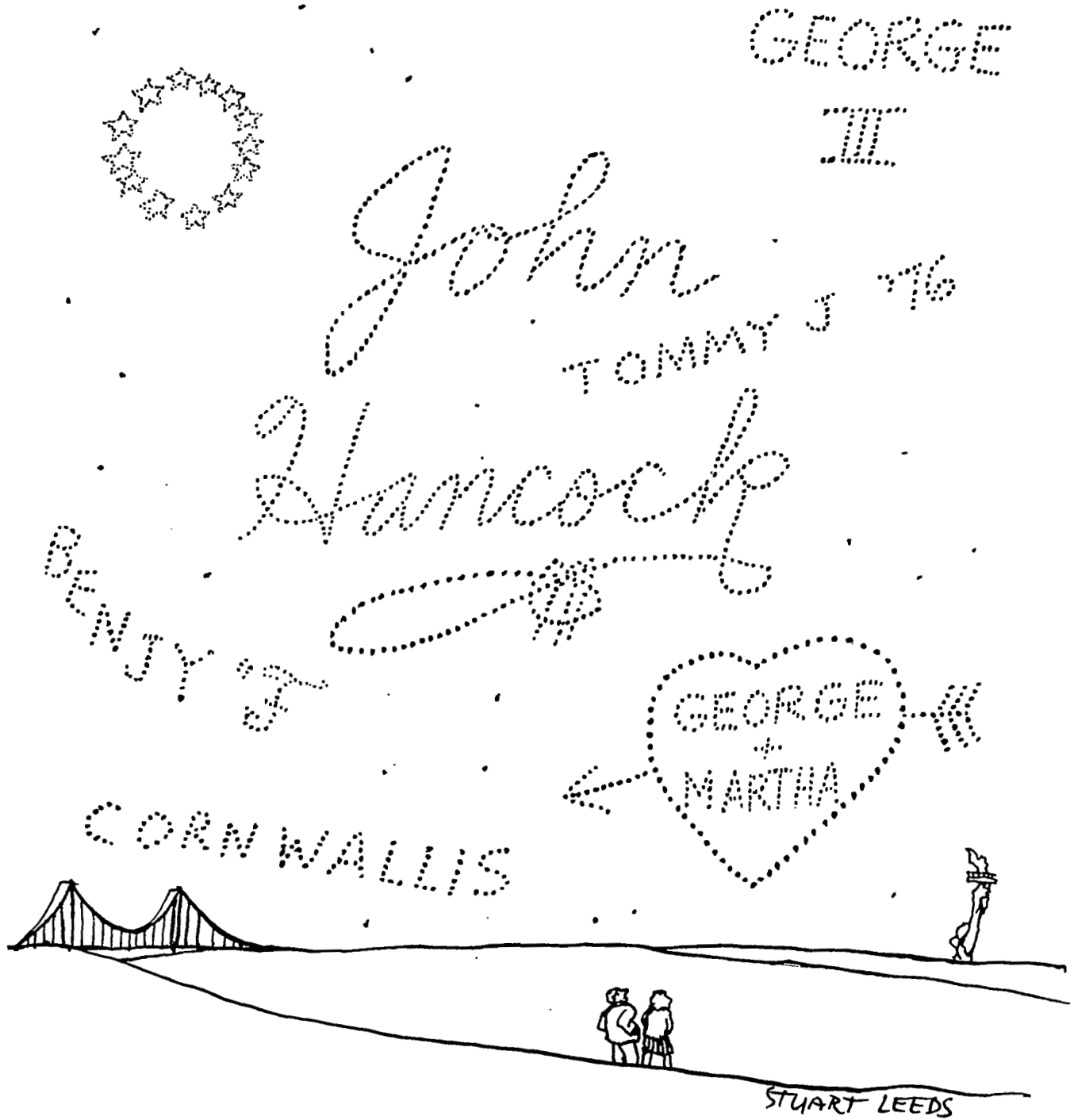
It was an eventful day. Consider the strange case of Nieh Chang-hsin:

Nieh Chang-hsin, a swimmer of the militia of the Hangkow Thermal Power Plant, became so excited when he saw Chairman Mao that he forgot he was in the water. Raising both hands, he shouted: "Long live Chairman Mao! Long live Chairman Mao!" He leapt into the air but soon sank into the river again. He gulped several mouthfuls, but the water tasted especially sweet to him.

A close reading may raise a doubt as to whether Nieh Chang-hsin ever reemerged from the waves of the Yangtse. If not—well, what a way to go!

The moment of moments arrived at exactly 11 o'clock, when Mao Tse-tung strode down the gangplank and dipped into the water.

The Yangtse was in spate; its current was swift and the rolling waves pounded the shores. Swimming in the vast river, Chairman Mao sometimes made his way through the turbulent waters by side-stroking and sometimes he floated on his back, looking at the azure sky.



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He was accompanied in the water by the Second Secretary of the Central South China Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and the First Secretary of the Hupeh Provincial Party Committee, and by what was described as a group of robust youths. As he swam, he chatted with his companions.

A young woman told him: "This is the second

time I'm swimming in the Yangtse." Smiling Chairman Mao replied: "The Yangtse is wide and deep. It is a good place to swim in." When Chairman Mao discovered that another young woman accompanying him could only swim in one style, he amiably taught her the back-stroke. He said: "The Yangtse is deep and its current is swift. This can help train your body and strengthen your willpower."

And so it went until it was nearly noon and a five-degree wind churned the waves. The Chairman was urged to board the launch to take a rest, but he protested that they had not even swum for an hour.

When they had swum 65 minutes, Comrade Wang Jen-chung again asked Chairman Mao to take a rest on the launch. Chairman Mao joked: "Since you are First Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee here, I have to obey your order!"

We are informed the Chairman swam downstream nearly fifteen kilometers, from near the mouth of the Wuchang dikes to a spot close to the Wuhan Iron and Steel Company. Among the spectators at the proceedings were delegates visiting Wuhan after having attended the Afro-Asian Writers' Emergency Meeting. Needless to say, they were appropriately touched.

Foreign friends very highly praised Chairman Mao's call to swim across the Yangtse and the fact that he personally took part in it. They considered it of great significance. They declared that it was a great, unprecedented event for Chairman Mao to have taken the lead in crossing the Yangtse and for the Chinese people to follow this with nationwide swimming activities. It showed the courage of the Chinese people and their defiance of all hardships and dangers.

Lovers of literature will be interested to learn that the delegation from Niger, while attending the meeting in Peking, *collectively* wrote a poem expressing their great love for Mao. It may lose something in translation.

Mao Tse-tung, you are our leader,
Mao Tse-tung, you are our beacon,
Which illuminates, illuminates, illuminates
The darkest, the furthest horizons....

For the Western reader, far removed from the realities behind the adulation of tyrants, the *Peking Review's* account of Chairman Mao's aquacade is very funny. One wonders if the anonymous author did not intend it that way. The Chinese were once noted for their sense of humor.

Lawrence Nevins has taken dips in ponds, lakes, and creeks, but he has never swum in a major river.

QUOTE / UNQUOTE

America, the Everlasting Refuge

Q: Will the oppressed become oppressors when they are liberated?...

A: But then at least we will take turns! Maybe it will be worse, but at least it will be different. What is more, it would be the majority oppressing a minority. Now the minority oppresses the majority.

Tell me of one place in which the defeated have been massively and systematically reduced to conditions in which the poor live today. It is true that the newspapers may be closed. But now the poor not only do not have newspapers; they do not have food. For today's oppressors, who may be threatened by the release of the oppressed, there will always be a country they can take refuge in—for example, the U.S. All the upper-class Cubans are in the U.S. and live very well now. There will always be a place where they can go.

—Dow Kirkpatrick with Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Liberation Theologians and Third World Demands," *Christian Century*, May 12

On the Spanish Left

The folly of the opposition, facing a solidly installed adversary not at all lacking in popular support, consists of talking up socialist revolution when democracy has not even yet been reintroduced. The fear of being counterrevolutionary goes to strange lengths. Thus one may read in the organ of the Christian Democratic left, *Cuadernos para el diálogo* (March 27, 1976), "As long as there are people like Solzhenitsyn, concentration camps will have to continue. Perhaps they even should be a bit better patrolled so people like Solzhenitsyn cannot get out of them." How far can ideological alienation go? A ludicrous detail: the editor of this publication, the Christian Democratic leader, Joaquin Ruiz Gimenez, is vice-president of the Strasbourg Institute for the Rights of Man (the René Cassin Foundation)!"

—Jean-François Revel in *L'Express*, April 19-25

You Name It, We Make It

An American businessman looking over a contract he had just signed at the Canton Trade Fair for 1,000 dozen Chinese socks, noticed a small point he had earlier missed—all the socks were to be one size. "That is the only size our factory makes," a Chinese trade representative reportedly explained to the American.... In other corridors are displays of the Chinese goods for sale at the fair—everything from antique jade and rattan baskets to harvesting combines and commuters.

—*New York Times*, May 15