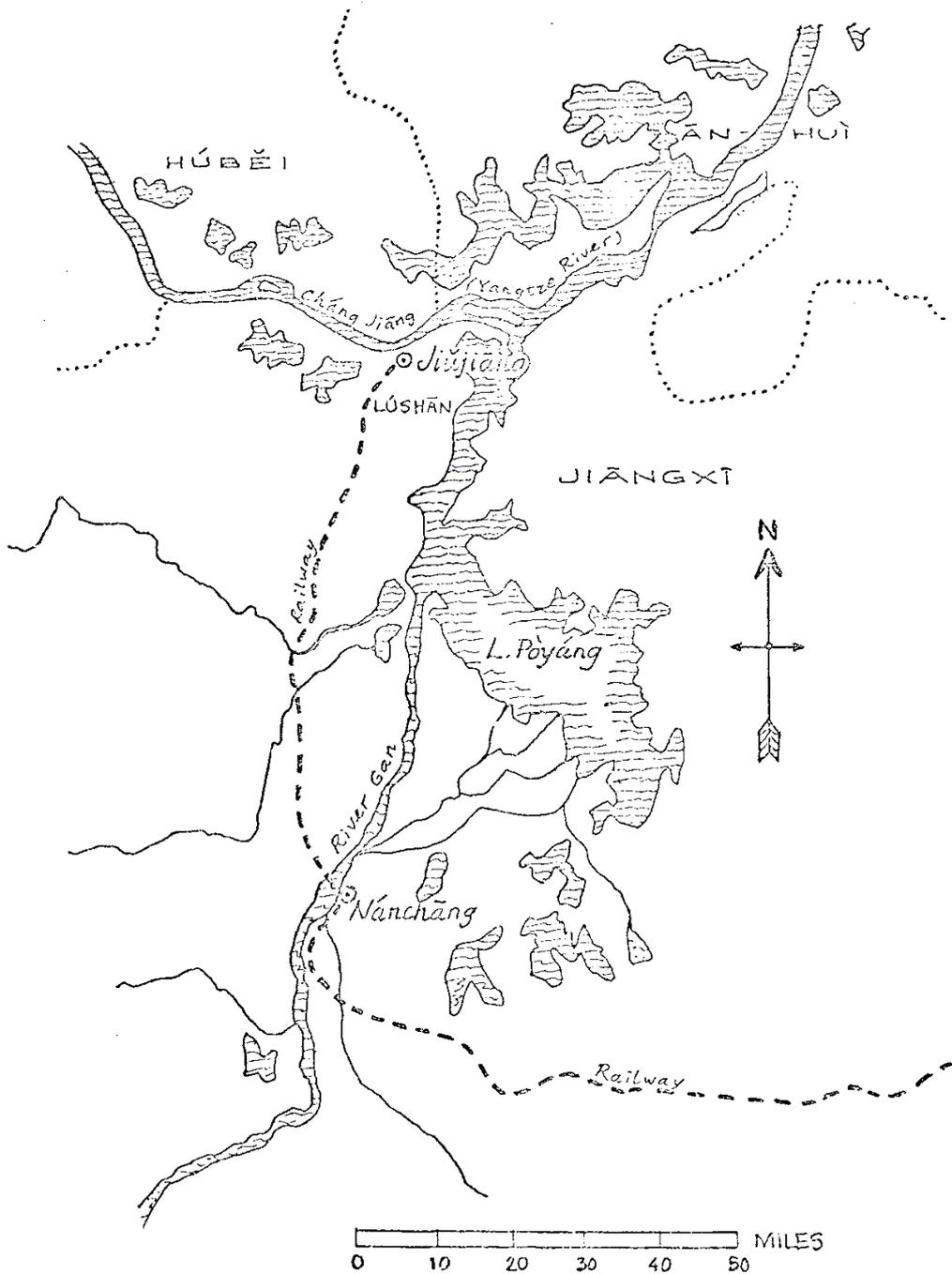


11 – NANCHANG AND LUSHAN



We were rudely awoken at 6.30 a.m. by the radio in our compartment, which suddenly burst into life with military music. Somebody on a lower bunk silenced it by turning the volume down. Soon afterwards the curtains were pulled back. By now it was sunny outside and the countryside looked a little

more interesting, for we could see hills, trees, farmhouses, and gravestones here and there. People were working hard in the fields. Heading southwards, we were now seeing more paddy fields. Occasionally distant mountains loomed out of the morning mist.

After breakfast in the dining car we got ready to leave. We had just enough time for a hasty wash before the train stopped in Nanchang station at 8.20. Groggy after a poor night's sleep, we left the train and carried our hand luggage to a waiting room nearby. This large room, pleasantly cool inside and with reverberant acoustics, looked remarkably like a chapel. It had high windows, and over the doorway hung what looked like a large religious painting. It depicted a saint-like Chairman Mao smiling benevolently at the beholder, with a crowd of colourfully-dressed disciples around him, all gazing at him in admiration. I wondered if we were expected to genuflect.

Here we were invited to sit down on comfortable bamboo chairs and couches, which were arranged around low tables. We were handed leaflets about Nanchang, which I was too tired to read, and introduced to our new guides, who turned out to be quite pleasant. We were now given a brief introduction to the city, which had been built some 2,100 years ago in the Han dynasty. At one time it produced nothing but pottery. In 1927 the Chinese Communist Party led an uprising here against the Nationalists, but we were not told that it had been defeated.



People in Nanchang (PF)

After the introduction we were invited to take a 'short rest'. This lasted for approximately ten minutes. We were then informed that we would be taken to see a local cotton mill, and that it would be safe to leave our cases and hand luggage in the room. The doors under the 'holy picture' were then opened, and we stumbled out into the main street, where a coach was waiting for us. As we boarded it, people came running from everywhere to take a look at us, and policemen appeared on the scene to keep a check on them. Many of the people smiled and applauded. Although the majority of those around us were poorly clad, they appeared to be cheerful and healthy.

When we moved off, we drove through the very drab city, passing scruffy-looking flats, shabby brown brick buildings of no architectural merit, shacks, heaps of building materials, and lots of muddy patches here and there. Men and women, both old and young, strained as they pulled cartloads of assorted goods; some of them were piled high with iron bars. We noticed old people giving youngsters lifts on these carts and other vehicles. The streets were also full of bicycles, crowded buses, and lorries. As everyone stared at us, we got the impression that few people from the outside world visited this somewhat out-of-the-way place. When we drove through the suburbs, we saw factories in fields and slum-like living quarters. We noticed quite a number of children working and carrying heavy loads. The fact that we had been brought to this backwater might have been proof that our guides were not trying to hide the poverty of their country.

We finally arrived in the grounds of the cotton mill, where we stopped outside a large building. We were welcomed by the chairman of the revolutionary committee and brought upstairs to a large room, where we were given the usual tea and a briefing. We were told that the mill had been founded in the 1950s and was the biggest in the province; it had its own medical service, clinic, nursery, primary school, and club.

We then drove to the noisy factory, where we donned face masks and were shown around the place. We saw girls working at hundreds of machines that thinned down the raw cotton until it became the thickness of thread. The young ladies, who looked quite charming, smiled at us. Many of them moved about on motorized seats, as they had to continually thread reels and attend to the various machines. Working in this dreadful factory must have been incredibly monotonous; as the machines were so noisy, we could not hear what information was being shouted at us. After walking through room after room full of clattering machines, we saw cotton thread being woven into a coarse material.

After our tour of the factory, we were taken to the local kindergarten. Although the children were sweet, we had by now seen so many these places that the fascination was beginning to wear off. We were first shown some very young children who were just sitting on tiny stools and playing



Kindergarten in cotton mill, Nanchang. Note the picture depicting children attacking the severed heads of the Gang of Four. (PF)

simple games. Their colourful dress contrasted with their dreary surroundings. Some slightly older children performed a dance with wooden swords, and others did gymnastics. We saw children making little decorations using paper and plastic, and in a classroom we saw children counting – of all things – sickles, which were painted on a board. Counting and propaganda together!

In another part of the complex, a group of older children gave us a traditional song and dance show. They were dressed very elaborately and colourfully, but had far too much makeup on their faces. They danced political dances and sang political songs to the dreadful accompaniment of a harmonium and drums. There was a dance in praise of Chairman Hua, another in praise of the harvest, one that portrayed picking carrots, and one entitled 'Early Morning in the Kindergarten'. This last dance was performed with tambourines. The performance was reasonably good, but we had seen enough of this type of thing and we were rather weary after our train journey.

When we finally left, all the children followed us and cheered, shook hands with us, applauded, and waved as we clambered aboard our bus. We then drove back to the briefing room for questions over more tea. As my throat was sore and my voice was beginning to pack up, I asked Paddy Flanagan to ask a question for me. I wanted to know if the noise level in the cotton mill disturbed the workers and if the authorities were planning to do

anything about it. Unsurprisingly, I received a rather vague answer. The chairman said that the noise did not disturb the workers, but that something would be done about it in the near future. I discovered later that Chinese factories do tend to be very noisy.

We left the place at 10.30 a.m. and travelled back to the railway station in scruffy Nanchang. By now we had heard that we would be going to the nearby Lushan mountains, which sounded quite exciting. Having collected our luggage, we boarded another train and set off northwards.

After a short sleep, I joined my companions for lunch at midday. I spent some of the journey looking at a Nagel guide to China, which Patricia and Catherine had brought with them. However, our new local guide, a young lady named Miss Qing, espied it and began to read aloud from it. Frank Cahill corrected her whenever she mispronounced a word. Although a little old fashioned in her ways, she was a very pleasant lady. I spent the rest of the time looking out the window at the scenery.

We eventually came to a halt in Jiujiang station at about three o'clock. This town, north of Lake Poyang, is noted for its fine porcelain and tea. Amidst a crowd of onlookers we boarded an old, rusty, and evil-smelling bus, which contained seats designed for dwarfs. The engine roared into life and, with the stench of diesel fuel in our nostrils, we set off for the Lushan mountains.

The old bus had certainly seen its best days; it rattled and made a terrible din even when the driver was not blowing the horn, which he seemingly felt obliged to do every few moments. We opened all the windows to let out the foul smell. Jiujiang, like Nanchang, looked poor and scruffy. As we sped through the town, we passed a large lake on our right. Built on a small island that was joined to the mainland was a stone pavilion, which looked quite picturesque.

Soon we were out of the dismal town and driving through the countryside. As we travelled, the sun began to shine and mountains began to emerge from the mist. This was Lushan, meaning 'Mount Lu', though the name is applied to a large mountain range and not just a single mountain. The old bus groaned as we began to climb. Paddy Flanagan, who had fallen asleep beside me, was being jolted all over the place by the movement of the bus. However, the higher we climbed the more spectacular the view became, which made up for any discomfort. We were now in what I considered to be typical Chinese scenery: beautiful valleys with terraced paddy fields, and villages tucked into the folds of the mountains. The wooded mountains had irregularly-shaped peaks that vanished into the clouds here and there. The vista around us resembled a scene in a Chinese landscape painting, with blank spots indicating the mist. I now realized that,

although they were idyllic depictions, these paintings were not exaggerated as we now had the real thing in front of us now.

As we climbed higher and higher, we looked down over dizzying views of the plain far below. I would have loved to have taken pictures on my ciné and still camera, but the bus was too bumpy. After a series of sharp turns and near collisions with oncoming lorries, we worked our way around to the other side of the mountain range, from where we saw a magnificent view of Lake Poyang gleaming in the sunshine and vanishing into the mist. The shoreline of this vast lake snaked its way hither and thither several thousand feet below us. We were told that in summer the lake was ninety miles long and between three to twenty miles wide.

Painters of yore had frequented this region, and poets such as Bai Juyi (A.D. 772–846), who had been banished here, wrote about it. Jiujiang, which means 'nine rivers', was often referred to in classical poetry as the 'nine branches'. The name refers to the nine tributaries that flow into the River Yangtze, which is north of Lake Poyang and Lushan.

Up we climbed into the clouds. To see Chinese mountains enveloped by cloud is a very pretty sight from a distance, but to be enveloped by cloud is a different matter entirely, as little or nothing can be seen. Shapes loom out of the mist, the temperature drops, and it becomes damp.

After driving for about an hour, we descended slightly and the mist disappeared. We now approached a small town that we could see tucked into the side of a mountain. It looked most peculiar as there was nothing Chinese about it; most of the nondescript buildings were built of brick and had corrugated iron roofs. We drove through the town, called Lushan, turned to the left, travelled along a crooked road, and stopped outside a rather European-looking villa. We were now informed that we would be staying in a group of villas like this one – not a hotel. It was most peculiar the way in which we were always given such information at the last moment.

When we clambered out of the boneshaker, weary after our bumpy journey, we stood and gazed around. Here and there, among the pine trees, were more villas perched on the mountainside, no doubt overlooking a magnificent view, which was now obscured by mist. The place was blissfully quiet.

Carrying our hand luggage, we walked to the nearest villa, which was approached by stone steps. Inside we met and shook hands with the staff: a group of truly beautiful girls, wearing loose white jackets, who constantly smiled ravishingly at us. One in particular looked extremely pretty. Her complexion was so perfect and her facial features so agreeable that I assumed she was wearing makeup. But no; when I looked at her closely, I discovered that there was no trace of lipstick on her lovely lips, and that there was no rouge or powder on her soft cheeks. There were some young

men among the staff, but I took little notice of them as I was so captivated by the young ladies. The Brennans immediately named the very pretty girl 'Peach Blossom', which I thought was very appropriate.

Peach Blossom and her nymphs now escorted us to a room and invited us to sit in large comfortable armchairs. Once seated, they brought us hot damp cloths, hot towels, and cups of delicate green tea, appropriately named 'Cloud and Mist tea'. Our host welcomed us and told us some facts about the place, one of which was that Mao had visited the area and had written some poems here. The town and these villas had been made into a summer capital and the Nationalist military headquarters by Chiang Kai-shek, and it was here that the Nationalists had planned to stamp out the Communists in 1927. Later, when the Communists had taken over, a couple of plenary sessions of the Central Party Committee were held here, in 1959 and 1970. The North Mountain Highway, which we had travelled on, was begun in 1953 and had taken ten months to build.

Our host finished his introduction by telling us that we would be taken around and shown the various scenic spots tomorrow. This sounded quite promising.

After this introduction, we were given our room numbers and told that our villas were rather scattered. Picking up our hand luggage, we returned to where our suitcases had been left and identified them. Then Peach Blossom and her pretty colleagues took the heavy cases and carried them up the steep and winding stone steps to our various villas. They refused to let us carry any of the cases and lugged them up, smiling all the time. Occasionally they stopped to catch their breath, then continued.

The villa that Christopher and I were to share was a two-storeyed building. In the garden we left the lovely Peach Blossom, and two new smiling girls conducted us into the villa. Neither of these two lassies knew a word of English and only seemed to speak the local dialect, which I could not understand. However, this did not deter them from chatting excitedly to us, using gestures to make themselves understood. When we reached the villa, which was quite large and comfortable, we met some other girls; our two greeted them and they all laughed gaily. There were more smiles when we were shown into a pleasant and comfortable suite of rooms. Here we found a bedroom containing two double beds, a spacious study that contained a writing desk and a wardrobe, a large sitting room (which we shared with our companions next door, Molly and Peggy), and a large bathroom. The windows faced a fine view of pine trees, a garden, and the surrounding mountains. It was very peaceful up here and the atmosphere in the villa was relaxing; the walls were painted plain white, and all the furniture was made of wood.

I then went into the spacious bathroom, with its bare wooden floor and luscious greenery outside the windows, removed my sweaty clothes and took a welcome hot shower. Because of the dampness in the air, and the towels not being completely dry, I remained wet.

At six o'clock our two girls led us to the dining room, which was in another villa. As it was raining by now, we donned raincoats and put on rubber boots that we found in the hall, and our charming guides held umbrellas over us as we walked down the steps outside. The dining room was large, spotlessly clean, and homely. The staff looked after us in a thoroughly professional manner and provided us with an absolutely scrumptious meal. As was his wont, Frank Cahill asked for a glass of milk. I called one of the waiters and asked him for a glass of *niú nǎi*. This caused a considerable amount of confusion and discussion. As I could not understand what was being said, Mr Yao was consulted. After some more talk, he told us that they did not have any milk. There was another consultation, after which we were informed that they had powdered milk, and that it would be ready shortly. Eventually a glass of hot milk was brought out of the kitchen.

After this little episode, the waitresses kindly complimented me on my Chinese and indicated to their companions that I spoke it well. However, once again I could not understand them, as they all spoke the local dialect.

After the meal, Christopher, Tom, John, Donal and I went over to Donal and John's place for a game of cards. Their villa, which was very nice, had a large sitting room. We sat down in comfortable armchairs, at a low table, and a pack of cards and a bottle containing a small amount of whiskey were produced. Just as we were settling down, the two girls in the villa came into the room, politely excused themselves, went over to the sideboard, and made us cups of Cloud and Mist tea. They placed the cups on the table, smiled, excused themselves again, and left. We were certainly being given first-class treatment here!

The lads then got stuck into the whiskey, tea, and poker. As I had no idea of how to play poker, I sat and watched, sipping my tea. Later we heard the telephone ringing in the hall several times and the girls talking animatedly. We guessed that they were getting anxious about us as we had not returned to our own villas, and as we might not be able to find our way back in the dark.

We were quite right. When we finally finished playing at about nine o'clock and had gone out to the hallway, we found the two girls from our villa patiently waiting for us. I donned my light raincoat and sou'wester, and they led us back to our place. We were very grateful for them coming to fetch us, as we certainly would not have found the villa. I felt guilty for having caused them to worry about us. However, they were just as courteous as

ever, and flashed us more dazzling smiles when I wished them 'zài jiàn' ('good bye').

Christopher and I then retired to our damp beds. I did not have long to worry about this, for I soon fell asleep.