

SETTINGS

Remember the chrysanthemums

In China's very modern present, the past is never quite out of sight.
Boishakhi Dutt reports



ILK ROUTE: Mao Zedong's statue in Orange Island is a major tourist draw.

Photograph by Boishakhi Dutt

Changsha is electric. The capital of Hunan province in central China glows after dark, skyscraper facades flash shifting colours, their lights dance on the Xiang river and streams of young people whizz about on colourful electric scooters. In sum, it feels like festival time.

Across the river, on Orange Island, young Mao Zedong stands tall.

The 32-metre stone statue depicts Mao at 32. The island, named for its orange trees, is crowded from early morning with joggers and visitors armed with takeaway iced teas, the guide tells the media delegation from Calcutta.

To the west is Yuelu Mountain and at its foot is Yuelu Academy, one of the four great academies of ancient China. Mao spent his formative years here studying. This is where he wrote the poem *Changsha* around that age. It goes: "Alone I stand in the autumn cold/On the tip of Orange Island,/The Xiang flowing northward;/I see a thousand hills crimsoned..." The poem is on display at the academy.

Mao arrived in Changsha as a teenager from Shaoshan village, which is 70 kilometres away. Here he encountered Western political ideas and eventually returned to study and teach Marxism.

Early next morning, the bus sets out for Shaoshan. Teeming crowds and long queues fill a vast square, visitors clutch tall bouquets of chrysanthemums. At the far end is a bronze statue — 10.1 metres tall and on a pedestal — of a man in a tunic. The word "chairman" is emblazoned on his chest, and there is a manuscript in his hand.

Twenty-five red flags flutter around the statue. To its left is a rack where visitors leave yellow chrysanthemums, which Mao loved, and packets of his favourite brands of cigarettes.

About a 10-minute walk away is his former residence. Pine and bamboo-covered hills rise on one side, rice fields and ponds lie in front of the picture-postcard house

built of mud bricks and tiles. A long queue of tourists waits outside patiently.

The guide tells us Mao worked in the rice fields and swam in the ponds, now covered with lotus plants. Visitors stop to take pictures in front of the house, some reaching out to touch the paddy as they walk along a narrow path cutting across the fields. It is 34-35°Celsius, humid, but tourists, undeterred, pack into the Mao memorabilia-cum-ice cream and snack shack opposite the boyhood home. Young people make up most of the crowd.

Back in Changsha, another

version of the city awaits us. The little bus rolls into Zoomlion Smart Industrial City. Heavy machinery lined up neatly along one side looks oddly familiar. We soon discover why.

The fluorescent green crane brings back flashes of the Garden Reach godown collapse in Calcutta from three months ago. For weeks, the media was full of images of the mangled concrete sheets with the bright green crane standing in the foreground as rescue teams searched for trapped warehouse workers.

Jumping out of the way of AI-powered robots quietly

going about their jobs — there are very few humans — we tour the assembly section at Zoomlion that makes construction and agricultural machinery and other high-tech equipment.

The day is far from over. "Changsha never sleeps," is something the guide keeps repeating. That night, we decide to see for ourselves.

We are armed with apps — for translation, for maps, for cabs and payments. Walking out of the hotel, we find a taxi on the kerbside and show the driver "Wuyi Square" on a translation app. He nods and we get in.

Twenty minutes later, we find ourselves in the middle of a market square that seems to have a energy of its own. Neon buildings, dizzying digital billboards, crowds stretching as far as the eye can see; crowds walking, browsing, shopping, eating. Tiny street-food stalls line the bylanes, with diners perched on benches.

At one end of the square stands a statue of Huang Xing, who, along with Sun Yat-sen, helped overthrow imperial dynastic rule and founded modern China.

We had earlier crossed paths with Sun Yat-sen in Nanjing, in Jiangsu province on China's eastern coast. "Like your Gandhi," our guide had said on the way to his mausoleum, which stands on Purple Mountain, atop 392 steps. The number signifies China's population — 392 million — when it was built, after his death in 1925.

The avenues leading to the mausoleum are lined with majestic, shade-giving Wutong trees, Sun's favourite, we were told.

Our first stop in Nanjing had been the Memorial Hall of the Victims in the Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders in 1937. Here, four journalists from China Media Group's Bengali division in Beijing joined our delegation and travelled with us for the rest of the trip. Among them was Dr Yang Weiming, a Chinese scholar of Bengali whose doctoral thesis is on Tagore's influence on erstwhile East Bengal.

What drew her to *Bangla*? "Rabindranath," she replies. I ask what drew her to his writing, and that is when I learn that even today, children in China read Tagore's poems in translation, including Poem No. 35 of *Gitanjali* — "Chitto jetha bhoyshunno... Where the mind is without fear." And what drew her to journalism? "The desire to keep working in *Bangla*."

Boishakhi Dutt was in China on an invitation from The Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Kolkata.