



● Fallen idol . . . the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall is cracked and neglected, but work is under way to get it back into shape in time for the centenary celebrations.

# A village called Mao

**W**HILE nearly all the statues of Mao Zedong which covered China in the 1960s have already been torn down, the residents of Shaoshan have decided to buck the trend and are putting one up.

The 3.5-ton bronze monolith will depict Mao declaring the founding of the "new China" in 1949 and, once in place, will tower exactly 10.1 metres above the ground; "10.1" or October 1, being the date of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The gleaming new effigy will be surrounded by six smaller statues of Mao's relatives, including favoured son Mao Anying and first wife Yang Kaihui, and will be placed in a vast new plaza being built in the centre of the once sleepy village where Mao was born and grew up.

Surrounded by mechanical diggers, slabs of concrete and pools of mud, a gang of labourers is working round the clock to ensure the plaza will be ready by December 26, the 100th anniversary of the Great Helmsman's birth.

A massive contingent of senior Communist Party officials is expected to descend on the village for the anniversary celebrations, and no expense is being spared on their behalf.

Unightly buildings are being razed while anything remotely connected with Shaoshan's most famous son is being given a fresh coat of paint to make sure the village is pristine by December.

Despite the disruption to their lives caused by the building project and the hundreds of tourists who trek to Shaoshan every day, the vil-

As the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Great Helmsman approaches, the sleepy village where he was born is leading efforts to commemorate the day, reports **Geoffrey Crothall** from Shaoshan

lagers seem unperturbed by the activity.

"It's no problem at all. It's good for the village," said one elderly man named Mao (just about everybody in Shaoshan is called Mao) as he contemplated his next move in a *mah jong* game.

Indeed, the 100th anniversary combined with the renewed interest in Mao over the past three years has brought a new lease of life to the village which had largely been neglected by the rest of China throughout the previous decade.

In the mid-80s Shaoshan was a ghost town. Just about the only people to make the pilgrimage to Mao's birthplace were government officials, curious locals and a few Western back-packers.

On some days, Mao's family residence, an extensive yellow sandstone building nestling under the trees on the hillside and guarded by a picturesque lily pond, would receive less than a dozen visitors.

When British author Colin Thubron visited the residence in 1985, he found himself almost alone. "Only once, a party of young men hurried through as if searching for something else," Thubron wrote in his book *Behind the Wall*.

The neglect of Shaoshan both by tourists and the government treasury in Beijing led to deterioration of

many of the village's historic sites.

The most noticeable victim of neglect was the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall which contains one of the most extensive collections of Mao memorabilia in the world, including the heavy grey limousine Mao used when he returned briefly to Shaoshan in June 1959.

Built in 1964 and redeveloped twice, in 1969 and 1976, the sprawling three-storey complex of villas and courtyards covers 6,700 square metres, but much of the building had



already fallen into disuse by the early 80s.

The exterior walls are cracking and many of the exhibition rooms have clearly seen better days.

But, with the 100th anniversary looming, the hall's administrators, with the help of a much needed cash injection from Beijing, have embarked on a massive renovation project designed to make the museum as good as new by the end of December.

At least half the galleries have been closed for repairs as craftsmen painstakingly restore the exhibits to their former glory. However, they clearly still have a long way to go and it is by no means certain everything will be finished by the December 26 deadline.

Shaoshan is not alone in the flurry of activity preceding the anniversary celebrations. Hunan provincial capital Changsha, where Mao spent his formative years, is also in a state of high excitement.

At the No 1 Teachers School, an ornate and distinctly bourgeois colonial-style establishment, attended by Mao between 1914 and 1918, another Mao statue is going up.

This particular effigy, to be built on a small hill overlooking the main part of the school, will show Mao in his youth wearing a traditional scholar's gown rather than the mature Mao in an overcoat which was the standard for statues in the heyday of Mao worship.

The school is unrestrained in its pride in its former student. Just about every room he ever set foot in is now a shrine; even the well from which Mao supposedly drew water

for his cold shower after his early morning exercises is now a site of veneration.

Visitors to the school are immediately accosted by students eager to provide guided tours of the sacred sites and recount what an exceptional student the Great Helmsman was.

In other parts of the city, many of the buildings and sites associated with Mao are also undergoing renovation.

At Qingshitang, the cottage where Mao lived with his first wife, Yang Kaihui, from 1921-23 and which served as the first office of the Hunan Communist Party Committee, is undergoing a major facelift but unfortunately the black and white colour scheme chosen by the decorators makes the building look more like a British Tudor cottage than a traditional Hunanese peasant dwelling.

But not all the revolutionary sites of Changsha have been designated for beautification. The building in Wanglu Yuan where in 1927 Mao wrote his seminal *Hunan Peasant Report* is in an appalling state of disrepair and is closed to the public.

Despite the historic significance of the site (Mao also opened a cloth factory there in 1922 to fund the Communist Party) the building has been allowed to decay. Only a small weathered plaque distinguishes the building from its surroundings.

Perhaps the local authorities decided that because the only way to get to Wanglu Yuan was through a series of dirty narrow alleys in one of the oldest and most dilapidated parts of the city, it was probably not a good idea to encourage too many visitors.