

China: Past and Present

Education

[p.236]

Education, which is as ubiquitous as the race, and penetrates to the lowest classes, has been hitherto entirely classical. Even the three years during which a sufficient knowledge is acquired for commercial purposes are devoted mainly to memorizing some of the ancient books. The main purpose of all these classics, whether odes, annals or analects, is to teach moral and political philosophy. Besides accuracy and fulness of knowledge of the classics, the essential elements for degree examinations are literary style, penmanship, and ability to compose a poem on any given subject. There are village schoolmasters and family tutors, while every city has a full supply of teachers of all degrees of talent, but there is no university with its staff of teaching and examining professors.

The examiners for the lower degrees are the district judges, while for the higher, men of the greatest literary attainments and high civil rank are nominated by the emperor. The object of the examinations, which are spread over a series of years, is not to ascertain how or where the scholar has attained his learning, but whether he possesses the knowledge requisite.

Thus among the Chinese, who are, notwithstanding their absolute form of government, one of the most democratic of existing nations, though wealth and social status have their necessary advantages, the full benefits of education percolate down to the very poorest, and, as sometimes happens, the son of a common labourer may become prime minister of the most populous and one of the most wealthy of all empires.

But the exclusive reign of Chinese classics over the literary arena, and their monopoly of official rank, are about to cease. For years thoughtful men among conservative officials, while their feelings are opposed to all change, have been compelled to acknowledge that the education hitherto imparted in China has been defective.

The Viceroy Tso, who successfully conducted one of the most extraordinary of modern campaigns, that against Central Asia and Kashgaria, and who, as opposed to Viceroy Li, was regarded as conservative leader, on his death-bed drew up a memorial to the emperor in which he prayed his majesty for the welfare of the country to take immediate steps to remedy the defects in Chinese education by the adoption of such western learning and methods as are calculated to supply the acknowledged deficiencies. Whatever may be thought of the variously-judged Viceroy Li, it is well known that he has for many years, indeed we suppose ever since his connection with Chinese Gordon, favoured the introduction of western methods into Chinese life, especially into the military. He is probably one of the best customers, beyond Germany, of the Essen works. He fostered in every way the medical mission of the late lamented Dr. Mackenzie in Tientsin, under whom he supported a number of English-speaking Chinese students of medicine, whom he has employed, or will employ, in his army or somewhere under his widely-extended jurisdiction. He has also established a school in Tientsin for naval cadets, whose rapid acquisition of mathematics and theoretical navigation has been cause of wonder to local Englishmen who declare that English youth would not have acquired the same knowledge in the same time. It is at once conceded that all this is of a piece with the establishment of a well-equipped navy under English officers, and is intended to defend the empire from external attack.

For a considerable number of years the British government in Hong Kong has provided schools to impart a good English education to Chinese children. These schools have been largely patronised, so that now in every open port in China are found not a few Chinese who speak and write English accurately, and who despise the hybrid and uncouth "pidgin" English. Some missionaries in Shanghai have for many years devoted part of their time to educating Chinese youth, and several of the most noted Chinamen of the day thus received an English education. More recently a college with a competent staff of teachers was established by the Chinese government in Peking for instruction in English, mathematics and other useful knowledge. Under the able superintendence of Dr. Martin, formerly a missionary of the American Presbyterian Board, this college has turned out many well-trained men who are now occupying important official positions, both within the empire and among its representatives abroad. Another school, still younger in years, was initiated in Tungchow, Shantung, by Dr. Mateer, an American Presbyterian missionary, who has been supported not by imperial funds, but by his missionary society. By him a thoroughly good Chinese education is given as well as excellent instruction in western science. The fame of the school has already spread over the land, and numbers of its graduates are now employed as teachers. The youngest of all the schools is one just started, or about to be started, in Canton. A society countenanced by official authority exists for the purpose of translating scientific and educational works for the use of schools. All these have done and are doing capital service in the way of slowly leavening the reading people of China with the modern knowledge of western nations.

Yet these hitherto isolated attempts, valuable though they are in themselves, were but tiny specks of detached nebulae among the huge immensity of darkness enveloping that extensive land, with its swarming crowds of intelligent men and women. Now, however, every one interested in the "Progress of Humanity" may join the more far-seeing Christian believer in anticipating a radical, rapidly increasing, and widely-extended change; for the whole question of education as the key to civil service and official employment has entered upon a new phase.

Even though the emperor should privately wish to issue an edict upon a particular matter he must

[p.237]

be memorialized to do so by some of the highest officials before any measure is made the subject of imperial enactment. Thus, the Emperor Kaughi, who was anxious to promulgate a decree favouring the Roman Catholic religion, was compelled for a time reluctantly to abandon his design, because the proper officials refused to memorialize for such legislation. So in regard to this matter of education.

From the very memorial presented to the emperor, giving numerous and cogent reasons why he should permit the introduction into Chinese study of western science, we learn that the emperor was already favourable to the innovation. This remarkable memorial, which forms a new starting point in Chinese history, was presented little more than a year ago by Prince Kung, uncle to the emperor, as the spokesman for a number of the highest officials in the land. The memorial was "in regard to regulations for teaching astronomy, and mathematics, and the selection of students." Desiring it to be understood that they had been impelled to take this step, not by the love of innovation but from the consideration that the mechanical arts of the West have all their source in the science of mathematics, this memorial goes on: "But among persons who are unacquainted with the subject, there are some who will regard this matter as unimportant; some who will

censure us as wrong in abandoning the methods of China for those of the West; and some who will even denounce the proposal that Chinese should submit to be instructed by people of the West, as shameful in the extreme." Each of these three objections is treated at length. The answer to the first begins thus: "It is high time that some plan should be devised for infusing new elements of strength into the Government of China." The second is met in the following interesting and characteristic manner, intended to smooth down the opposition of the proud conservatism of the literates. "On enquiring, it will be found that Western science had its root in the astronomy of China, which Western scholars confess themselves to have derived from Eastern lands. If, therefore, we apply ourselves to those studies, our future progress will be built on our own foundation." The last objection, in reality the most serious, is declared to be the "most absurd" of all, "For under the whole heaven the deepest disgrace is that of being content to lag in the rear of others. Of the jealous rivalry among the nations of the Western ocean it is unnecessary to speak; but when so small a country as Japan is putting forth all its energies, if China alone continues to tread indolently in the beaten track, without a single effort in the way of improvement, what can be more disgraceful than this?... The object which we propose for study to-day, is the principles of things. To invite educated men to enlarge the sphere of their knowledge by investigating the laws of nature is a very different thing from compelling them to take hold of the tools of the working man.... In conclusion, your servants have considered this maturely. As the enterprise is a new one, its principles ought to be carefully examined. To stimulate candidates to enter in earnest on the proposed curriculum, they ought to have a liberal allowance from the public treasury to defray their current expenses, and have the door of promotion set wide open before them.... We are of opinion that the junior members of the Hanlin Institute, being men of superior attainments while their duties are not onerous, would find the sciences of astronomy and mathematics an easy acquisition." Then follows a list of other grades of learned men who should be examined as to their fitness for becoming students.

No very great interval elapsed between the publication of this memorial (which was translated in the "Chinese Times") and the promulgation of an imperial decree adopting its chief recommendations. While, therefore, the old subjects will be as heretofore adequate for the possession of a degree, the new subjects are introduced into the Examination Hall on an equal footing. Indeed, if we are to judge by recent events, a preference is to be given to those students who are acquainted with western science. Some Chinese of considerable culture and influence are still doubtful whether the conservative party will not indirectly stultify the measure. But it requires no very deep insight into Chinese life to know that the conservative is not a growing party. Sooner or later we may expect to see, not wholesale external changes, as in Japan, but a very substantial mental improvement by the ingress of knowledge, which will at a subsequent period introduce improvements in social life. This measure will doubtless give a fresh impetus to the very general interest existing now over China in regard to pure Christianity, and will add another to the powerful forces already bending the mind of China towards the "true light which lighteth every man coming into the world."

John Ross

This document is in the Public Domain. Prepared for the Web by Rob & Michelle Bradshaw.

<http://www.victoriansunday.org/>
