

The
Washington Historical Quarterly

CHINESE HISTORY.

It is natural that we should be especially interested in the history of our own intellectual ancestors, the people of Europe and Western Asia; and, as far as we can trace the origins of our Western civilization back Eastward into the great mysterious continent of Asia, our scholars are following with eagerness. But Western scholarship has not greatly interested itself in the records of the ancient Eastern civilization that has grown up on the other slope of the continent in the valleys of the Yellow, Yangtzu and Pearl Rivers. Until comparatively recent times China has been so separated from the rest of the world by the almost impassable high lands and the oceans that it might almost have been upon another planet. Because of this isolation, language and thought have developed in forms so strange that the intellectual isolation has continued long after the difficulties of physical geography have been overcome. The strong incentive that we have to delve into the ancient history of the Western Asiatic countries is lacking in the case of China and Japan, for, however deeply we go, we do not uncover the origins of our own institutions and ideals, but those of a civilization foreign to our thought and experience.

The independent development of language in the Chinese race creates great difficulty for the Western scholar. The monosyllabic structure puts a severe strain upon memories trained to the Indo-European polysyllabic forms, but the peculiarities of the Chinese writing make the greatest intellectual barrier between the East and the West. This is a barrier more formidable than the high lands of Thibet. Instead of making their written symbols stand for the spoken sounds by means of consonants and vowels, the Chinese polished up the early picture and arbitrary sign writing into a medium fit for literary expres-

sion. But the literature so formed is strange to the mental taste of the Western scholar. It appeals to the eye rather than to the ear. It has had its convenience among the diverse tribes of Eastern Asia, for it can be used and appreciated by tribes and nations who are unable to communicate with one another by the spoken word. So we have the spectacle of Japanese, Koreans and Chinese using different spoken languages, but all uniting in the use of one written language. The literature which is built up on the character writing has very great beauty and force to one whose proficiency has made him able to appreciate it, but it is almost impossible to represent adequately the merits of Chinese literature through translation into a European language. The structure of the language is too different.

The natural difficulties for the Western student of Chinese history and institutions have been needlessly increased since some interest began to be taken in the far East by the irritating perversity that has been shown by writers on Chinese geography, history and literature, in their manner of Romanizing the Chinese characters. If the official Chinese spoken language had been accepted by all translators as the standard, and if the sounds of that one dialect had been Romanized by the same system, so that the same letters might always stand for the same Chinese characters, the Western reader might soon become familiar with the important Chinese proper names, and be able to recognize them in the different works that are accessible to him. Unfortunately, up to the present time the writers on things Chinese have been so erratic or careless in this respect that they have seriously impeded the growth of knowledge of the Orient. It is with great difficulty that one familiar with the Chinese written and spoken languages can follow intelligently the average writer, owing to the very uncertain and irregular methods of representing the geographical and biographical names; while, to one who has not the advantage of previous knowledge of Chinese, the attempt to keep things straight often ends in complete failure. French and German writers generally use a system of their own, and English and American writers not only differ from the French and Germans, but differ among themselves in the most bewildering manner. The best service that could be rendered to the American student of Chinese history, if it were practicable, would be to revise and harmonize the books that have already been written, so that the reader might recognize the same names when referred to by different authors. The only hope that I see for an escape from the present confusion is

in the formal adoption by the Chinese Government of a standard and authorized system of Romanization for the Chinese characters. Until this is done, all writers ought to use the system employed by Giles in his Dictionary of the Mandarin Dialect, which is recognized now as the standard English-Chinese dictionary.

The time has now come when scholars who make any pretensions to broad learning must take seriously the study of Oriental affairs, and especially the history and literature of that great empire that has dominated the far East for ages. It may be that a more thorough study of Chinese antiquities than has yet been pursued may reveal more connection between East and West in ancient times than has yet been proven. But, however that may be, the world is now entering upon a new era, and in future the Eastern Hemisphere is not to be left out of our world politics. The trade that began in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the beginning of political and social relations, but it was a small beginning, and had little in common with what may be expected in the twentieth century. In the early days of trading with China, the foreign merchant lived on the outskirts of the great mysterious empire, and was satisfied to accumulate the fortune that would allow him to retire and forget the East, while the Chinese dealt with the outside foreigner through middlemen and pursued their own way, uninfluenced by the foreign science, customs and ideals. The greatest event of our generation, and that which will have the most far-reaching consequences, is the deliberate and formal adoption of the modern Western education, science and political ideas by the Asiatics. One-fourth of the human race, and that not the least intelligent and capable, has held aloof from the activity and competition of modern life through its conservative adherence to the ancient system of classical education; but now, by the establishment of schools of science, and by going abroad for study, these once conservative scholars are striving with feverish earnestness to assimilate the new learning that has transformed the West. Our domestic political questions look large to us because of their nearness, but if we could view the planet from a little distance off, the present political and social movements of the far East would dwarf all other current events as the Himalayas dwarf the New England hills. In olden times when swords and spears, backed by brawn and muscle, determined the fate of battles, the hordes of Central and Eastern Asia made Europe tremble several times. Now that the great

Yellow Race has elected to appropriate the science of the West, and to conform largely to the industrial, social and political methods of the West, the consequences must be far-reaching. We do not need to leap hastily to the conclusion that a Yellow Peril hangs over us, but we do need to study carefully the history, character and capabilities of this race that is suddenly forcing its way into the family of modern nations.

I can offer but a few observations in the time allotted to me to-day. The Chinese race has naturally a very high intellectual endowment. History shows this in the very early evolution of the Chinese from barbarism into civilization. It is a common idea among Western scholars that the Chinese showed early a fatal mental limitation in developing up to a certain point and sticking there. That may be a hasty or shallow conclusion. Progress or stagnation in race development is due always to complex causes, often quite outside the question of the natural ability of the individuals composing the race. Precocity in mental development may act as a handicap to after generations, and I think it has done so in the case of the Chinese. Abstract thought came so early among them that the machinery of recording thought had not been worked into a convenient form before it was seized upon and used for the expression of a literature so valuable that it held the written symbols to their rude forms and so arrested the natural development of written language. Looking at the matter from this standpoint, pictorial and sign writing was discarded in the West because, during the time when it was in vogue, there were no minds intelligent enough to use it in such a way as to cause any difficulty about displacing it by the more convenient phonetic writing, when that had been invented by the ingenuity of the trading class. In the far East, on the contrary, a noble and extensive literature made the character writing sacred, and so prevented change. The literary style of the character writing is so distinctive that no phonetic writing can ever adequately represent it. So the arrested development of language in China is not due to the stupidity of the people, but to the too early production of profound thinkers and elegant writers. These early thinkers of the Chinese race held up high ethical ideals. In fact, study in the line of ethics seems to have been, in their judgment, all that was worthy the attention of the scholar. As the Chinese primer puts it, "Jen pu hsueh, pu chih i." "If a man does not study he does not know his duty." The fact that literature and scholarship have been occupied too exclusively with ethics has no doubt

decreased the practical biting force of moral precepts in China, as has been the case in other nations when religion has dominated thought and literature to the exclusion of healthy mental exercise in other lines; but the high ideals of the Chinese have by no means completely lost their force, either upon individuals or upon collective national action. These ideals are the saving force of Chinese society. The more one comes to understand the people, the more he realizes this. The overpowering influence of the early writers has, up to recent times, succeeded in diverting the whole mentality of the nation into the realm of literature and abstract thought, and so has kept the mental energy of the race out of the channels of the material science which we have cultivated for a few generations only, but with such startling results to the conditions of living. It is interesting to observe throughout the whole course of Chinese history how the agnosticism of Confucian scholarship has operated to check the growth of superstition. Physical science is gradually freeing the Western world from the terrible bondage of superstition. The saneness of Confucius and the other ancient philosophers of China has served to safeguard the nation to a great extent throughout the long period that has preceded the epoch of material science. The fog of superstition is always rising in China as elsewhere, but the sun of clear thinking in the Chinese classics has always tended to scatter the paralyzing fog. A comparison of China and India shows this clearly enough. In the advantage of emancipation from superstition the scholar class of China will bear favorable comparison with the same class of any country or race which has not yet come into the heritage of the modern experimental science.

Chinese scholars have now at last definitely and finally decided to add the study of modern science to their curriculum, as Japan has already done. This means that in the near future the whole vast Mongolian race is destined to enter into all the activity and competition of modern life, whether it be intellectual, economic or military. There is, therefore, the most urgent need that we study earnestly and systematically the history, social conditions, and mental and moral qualities of these people who are coming forward as the great new factor in world politics. Blind conceit has brought much sorrow and misfortune to the Chinese in the past. When Europe first knocked at the door, the ancient civilization of China would not stoop to study carefully the antecedents and capabilities of the Western strangers. Loss and humiliation were the consequences. The West

now needs to be warned against the same fatal mistake. If we persist in treating the black-haired race east of the Himalayas as a joke, applying microscopic care to the history of one of our own villages while we grudge the time required to learn even the general outlines of Chinese and Japanese history, we shall have our day of reckoning.

When Western scholars do once turn their attention to the far East, they will be surprised to learn how much there is of real intellectual interest in the study of the working out among the Asiatics of the social and moral problems that are common to the human race. Temperance legislation, old age pensions, trade unionism and many other of our most modern problems you will find have been discussed ages before they were ever thought of on this side of the planet.

Twentieth century conditions call for a remodelling of our curriculum of study and the addition of the far Eastern history and institutions to the list. Only in this way can educators take the necessary lead in preparing our race for the readjustments that are before us in our international relationships.

CHARLES D. TENNEY.