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# THE CHINESE SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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TO ALL THOSE WHO  
ARE INTERESTED IN THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF EDUCATION IN CHINA

THIS MONOGRAPH IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

## PREFACE

The awakened interest in the new educational era in China has brought into existence, within the last few years, several books in English dealing specifically with the subject of Chinese education. Among these are "The Education of Women in China," by Margaret E. Burton; "The Educational System of China as Recently Reconstructed," by Henry Edwin King; and "Chinese Education From the Western Viewpoint," by Yen Sun Ho. Each of these timely works throws some light upon one or another of the many phases of Chinese education, and hence has a place in the literature of the subject. There is still, however, a great demand for a work which will present a connected account of the Chinese Public Educational System in its long process of development, giving a perspective view of the rise and fall of the ancient and traditional systems of education under successive dynasties, as well as a picture of the modern educational system as it is reorganized under the new republic. The present study is an attempt to fill this want, and, so far as the knowledge of the author goes, it represents the first serious attempt to disentangle the complicated history of Chinese education for the English-speaking public.

In dealing with a subject of this character, the question of selection among the materials available and that of proportion among the parts have been difficult to solve. In spite of the care taken, it will doubtless be found that many things have been omitted which were worthy in every way of a place with those which have been mentioned, and that some phases summarily dealt with might well have been elaborated. In spite of these limitations, I trust that this general sketch of the development of the Chinese Public Educational System may not only be useful to those who are in any way interested in Chinese education, but may also light the way for future research.

The main portion of the data for this study is derived from two general sources. The facts relating to the ancient and tra-

ditional system of education are secured from the authoritative encyclopedia by Ma-tuan-lin, entitled "Wen Hsien T'ung K'ao," from the supplement to the same work, and from Biot's work in French, entitled "Essai sur l'Histoire de l'Instruction Publique en Chine." Those relating to modern education are obtained from Chinese educational laws, reports of the Ministry of Education and other educational bodies, and the current numbers of the various educational periodicals, both official and private. Other sources of information are listed in the Bibliography.

I wish to express my thanks to Professors Farrington, Monroe, and Hillegas, of Teachers College, Professor Hirth, of Columbia University, and Dr. Sailer, of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, as well as to my colleagues Messrs. Yu and Chen for reading my manuscript. My thanks are especially due to the two professors in charge of my major studies, Dr. Strayer and Dr. Farrington, who have taken a deep interest in my work from the beginning to the end.

P. W. KUO.

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# THE CHINESE SYSTEM

OF

## PUBLIC EDUCATION

### INTRODUCTION

The development of the educational system of China is a subject full of deep and varied interest to all students, whether of history, of politics, or of education. From it one might be able to trace the causes operating at an early period of the world's history to lead the people of China to so high a degree of civilization and to hold in unity as a nation so many millions of people. One might also be able to trace from it the method used to insure the perpetuity of the government and the content of the people. The way in which China's educational system has helped her to mold the character of the people, giving them a cohesion and a stability remarkable among the nations of the world, and the manner in which she is now struggling to adapt herself to modern conditions and to meet new demands, are also full of practical lessons for statesmanlike educators of all nations. Indeed, a record of even the mistakes and failures made by China would be some contribution to the educational world, for it might prevent other nations from falling into similar errors and warn them to guard against similar mistakes. In a word, the story of the development of education in China, like that of other nations, possesses points of interest and lessons in management valuable either positively as models for guidance or negatively as experiments to be avoided.

In the following pages no attempt, however, has been made to write a complete history of Chinese education, for to do so one would have to include in its vast development the record of the intellectual and moral culture of the Chinese people, or a resumé of their life in its diverse manifestations, literary and

scientific, religious and political. He must, moreover, determine the causes, so numerous and so diverse, which have acted upon their character and shaped their educational institutions. What we have attempted to do is merely to make a critical survey of the development of the Chinese public educational system from the earliest time to the present period of rapid and startling transition. By the term "public educational system" is meant the system of schools maintained and controlled by the government for the education of the people. Strictly speaking, it does not include the civil service examination system, with which education in China is often identified, although the development of the one has been closely bound up with the development of the other. By the nature of the term, it does not even include the system of schools controlled by private individuals, which has played an important part in the development of Chinese education, for education in China has been, to a great extent, left to private initiative. Such being the limitation, the civil service examination system and the system of schools maintained by private individuals are therefore given a subordinate place in the course of this study. Indeed, they are mentioned only as they help to explain the evolution of the Chinese public educational system. Although the field of this investigation is so limited, the character of the study is nevertheless general rather than specific, extensive rather than intensive. This plan is adopted deliberately for the simple reason that at present the need for a work giving a comprehensive view of Chinese educational history is much greater than for one embodying the result of an intensive study of some single stage of the Chinese educational development.

Students of the history of education must have been struck by the fact that among the many influences which have shaped the destiny of education in Europe and America none have been so strong as those of religion and government. These two factors have also been the dominant influences in shaping the destiny of Chinese education. In the course of our inquiry we shall see that Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and in recent years Christianity, have all directly or indirectly exerted their share of influence upon the educational system throughout its course of development. We shall also note that the political consideration has been strong from the very beginning of

China's history. Indeed, it may be said that the safety and perpetuity of the state have been the motives at the back of almost every educational effort put forth by the government. The fact is that the educational system is a political institution maintained by the state for the cultivation and promulgation of national ideals in order that safety and stability might be secured. Every school has been likened to a machine deliberately contrived by the state for the manufacture of the kind of citizens which it wishes to have. In democratic states future rulers must be trained; in military states future soldiers. Thus each country brings forth through its educational institutions a type of men and women characteristic of itself.

In addition to religion and government, we must mention at least one other dominant factor which has influenced the development of Chinese education, namely, the reverence for antiquity. This high respect for the past, characteristic of the Chinese people, fixed the gaze of ages upon past glory instead of upon future progress. Two causes may be assigned for this state of affairs. The first is unfamiliarity with the law of progress. For thousands of years the people labored in such a way as to give the impression that the older the civilization the better it is, and that everything will be achieved when the condition of antiquity is once restored. The second cause is undue respect for the ancient sages, who were held in such a high degree of veneration that people had the idea that they must imitate their example in everything they do or say, otherwise their sin would be indeed great. The three factors here suggested, viz., religion, government, and reverence for antiquity, have sometimes hastened the progress of education and sometimes impeded its progress. They have in one way or another shaped the destiny of Chinese education.

Chinese institutions are an expression of Chinese character and, in turn, Chinese character is reflected in Chinese institutions, especially those of education. Thus the people of China have been democratic in spirit; so has been their educational system. Under the traditional system, persons of almost every rank or class of society could become candidates for degrees. It often happened that the humblest subject in the land climbed, by sheer ability, to the highest round of the official ladder. This same democratic spirit is now being manifested in the modern

educational system. The new schools provided by the government, as well as those provided by the people, are intended for all and are being utilized by all classes of society. At least there are as yet no sharp and well-defined schools intended for sharply defined classes of people, such as we find in Germany and, to some extent, in England and France. Indeed, in this respect China is rather more advanced than America, for even here the tendency of the upper classes of society to send their children to special schools, under one pretext or another, is still evident, especially in the East.

Again, the Chinese, like the English and the Germans, are known as highly conservative, and their educational system has also been conservative in character. The conservative element in the national character of the Chinese is well illustrated by the fact that the examination system, the Imperial Academy, and several other educational institutions had an almost unbroken existence for many centuries. The conservatism of the Chinese, however, has its limits. The important changes which the examination system and other educational institutions have undergone prove that they are by no means so fettered by tradition as to be incapable of welcoming improvements. They may be slow in making a new departure, but once the truth strikes home and its practicability is demonstrated, they do not hesitate at the radical nature of the change, nor are they discouraged by the difficulties and obstructions in the way. The two characteristics here suggested will be fully illustrated in the course of our present study.

In estimating the worth of the system of education of a foreign country, one naturally and unconsciously is led to compare it with the system of one's own country. Here we may raise the question: What is to be the standard of comparison? Whatever may be the answer, it seems certain that in making comparisons between two systems of education our judgment does not depend upon an a priori set of conditions, but upon the suitability of each to its environment. For the question is not which is the better system, but which system is better suited to its social and political background. It is only through keeping in mind the setting of a system that one is enabled to give a true estimate of its worth. Without weighing the environment one is apt to judge a system according to ideal standards which

can be applied only to a system existing under ideal conditions. In judging China's modern educational system one has also to bear in mind that the policy of providing modern education upon a national basis was not adopted till a few years ago, and that she has not had as much time to develop it to a high degree of perfection as have the other nations. When due allowance is made for this it will be seen that China compares favorably with the best record found in the educational history of the world.

But when all allowances are made, there still remains doubt as to whether the systems of education are after all really comparable. Indeed, it has been declared by more than one writer on comparative education that the really vital elements of two systems of education cannot be directly compared. To quote Hughes, "We can place in juxtaposition tables and statistics showing the comparative costs of schoolhouses, payments of teachers and other officers, the relative amounts paid for educational purposes by each citizen, the amount spent on each child's training in the school, the regularity with which the children attend, the relative efficiency of the school laws, the relative facilities for higher training, and many other items; but the really vital question is not touched by such figures. For the question is, "Which of these systems of national training makes the best citizen?" and when the question is put thus one sees that its answer depends entirely upon what the phrase "best citizen" may connote. The phrase in France or Germany certainly does not imply the same attributes as in England or America, so that it is immediately evident how difficult, if not impossible, it is to answer such a question as "Which is the better educational system,—that of Germany or of England?"<sup>1</sup> Our consideration then leads to some such conclusion as this: that unless one takes extreme precautions, it is safer to let the system of China stand upon its own merits, remembering that any national system of training to be successful must meet national needs.

The question may be reasonably raised as to why China has been behind other nations in adopting a modern system of education providing training for all her citizens. The answer is, there was no necessity for it. For centuries China, secluded

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes: *The Making of Citizens*, p. 4.

by sea, mountain, and desert, was prevented from coming into contact with western nations. With no railways or steamboats, telegraph or telephone, and few, if any, newspapers, life was simple and limited. Each community was a world by itself. The traditional system of education was sufficient to insure the safety of the nation and the content of the people. The introduction of mechanical inventions of steam power and railway which came with the advent of merchants and missionaries from western countries made the Chinese see the possibility of a fuller and richer life. Moreover, the forced contact with the outside nations, the humiliations which China suffered, and the birth of a new nationalism, made it necessary to change all her social, political, and educational institutions, in order to enable her to withstand troubles from within and foes from without.

It is perhaps not out of place to recall here that the movement for national training is a comparatively recent one even in western countries, and that it did not attain any considerable growth until the nineteenth century. It is true that national systems of education had existed in some countries long before the modern era, but they were not comprehensive and national in any such sense as they are to-day. However, the necessity for such a training had long before been recognized by great minds, such as Luther, Knox, Mulcaster, and a score of other great educators.

Finally it must be observed that while China has been slow in introducing reforms in her educational system she has always regarded education as of the highest importance. Writers on China's recent zeal for modern education have often spoken as though a great change had taken place in the attitude of the Chinese people toward education. This desire for western learning, however, does not represent quite such a change as at first appears. The spirit shown is really the same old spirit which has characterized China for many centuries, namely, high respect for learning. The change is not in the essence of the spirit, but in the character of the learning which that spirit admires. It used to admire the literary and ethical excellencies of the ancient Chinese classics; it now extends its admiration to the practical realities and usefulness of western science, because it recognizes therein the instruments for the realization of its new national and patriotic ideals.

## CHAPTER I

### ORIGIN OF THE ANCIENT EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM (2357-1122 B.C.)

#### *Beginnings of Educational Effort*

The beginnings of education in China can be traced as far back as the very beginning of her civilization, to a time when her social and political organizations were just emerging from the earliest stages of development. At that epoch, that which constituted the education of the people was general in character, simple in form, and devoid of the complex organization characteristic of education in more highly developed stages of culture and civilization. People were then either still passing through the period of hunting and nomadic life or in the first period of settled life, and the training they gave to the young was chiefly in the acquisition of various means for satisfying the bodily wants, such as hunting, fishing, the keeping of flocks, and the cultivation of the fields. The individual received such training through his daily experience, through the experience of his family, and that of his tribe or clan. The aim of education, conscious or otherwise, was to devise means for the profitable use of the environment and for increasing the productivity of the material resources.

The earliest authentic record of educational institutions of a consciously organized character dates as far back as the time of the two ancient rulers, Yao and Shun (2357-2205 B.C.), whose reigns not only mark an advanced stage in the development of the political, social, and intellectual life of the ancient Chinese, but are considered as one of the most brilliant and perfect epochs in Chinese history, resembling the period of the Antonines in the history of the Roman Empire. During these reigns and in the two dynasties which immediately follow, namely those of Hsia (2205-1766 B.C.) and Shang (1766-1122 B.C.), we see not only the origin of the civil service examination system, which plays an important part in the history of Chinese education,



but also the origin of state educational offices and the beginnings of schools and colleges which soon developed into a complete system of schools the like of which one can scarcely find in the long history of Chinese education until we come to our own day.

### *Institution of the Examination System*

The ancient educational system of China is closely bound up with the competitive examination system whose object was to provide men of ability for the service of the state. The latter system, however, originally started with testing the ability of those already in office and runs back in its essential features to the earliest period of recorded history.<sup>1</sup> The germ from which it sprang was a maxim of the ancient sages which is expressed in the following words, "Employ the able and promote the worthy," and examinations were resorted to as affording the best test of ability and worth. Of the Great Shun, that model emperor of remote antiquity, it is recorded that he examined his officers every third year, and after three examinations either gave them promotion or dismissed them from service.<sup>2</sup> On what subjects he examined them at a time when letters were but newly invented and when books were as yet rare,<sup>3</sup> we are not told, neither are we told whether he subjected candidates to any test previous to appointment; yet the mere holding of such a periodical examination established a precedent which continued to be observed even to modern times.

### *Creation of Offices of Public Education*

To the ancient sovereign Shun, the "Book of History" has also given the credit of having created among the nine administrative offices of the realm at least three offices of an educational character.<sup>4</sup> He appointed Hsieh as minister of education (Ssütu), to teach the people the duties of the five human rela-

<sup>1</sup> The examinations are of two kinds, which have been distinguished as pre-official and post-official; the former is the offspring of the latter, which it has outgrown and overshadowed.

<sup>2</sup> Legge: *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. III, Part I, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> The books of this early period are made of tablets of bamboo upon which characters are traced with a stylus. Some Chinese historians are wont to claim that a large number of books recording the events of and belonging to dynasties preceding the period of Yao and Shun were in existence, but such claims are unsupported by any trustworthy evidences.

<sup>4</sup> Legge: *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. III, Part I, pp. 47-48.