

The School System of China.

By ARTHUR H. SMITH.



IT has come to be well known that the Chinese Empire is one of the most remarkable examples in history of unity in diversity, and diversity in unity. For this reason, generalisations relating to all China are uniformly perilous, and must be made with the understanding that they are only efforts to represent fixed types exhibited under varying manifestations. It is to be observed that the following summary is based partly upon that general acquaintance with China which all old residents may be supposed to have, and partly upon more precise knowledge of two provinces—the metropolitan province of Chihli, in which Peking is situated; and the province of Shantung, in which China's greatest sages were born, lived, and died. It is not intended within the limited space at command even to refer to the question of the antiquity of the methods now in use, although it may be mentioned in passing that they are not only very ancient, but proceed from fundamental causes lying deep in the Chinese character and habits.

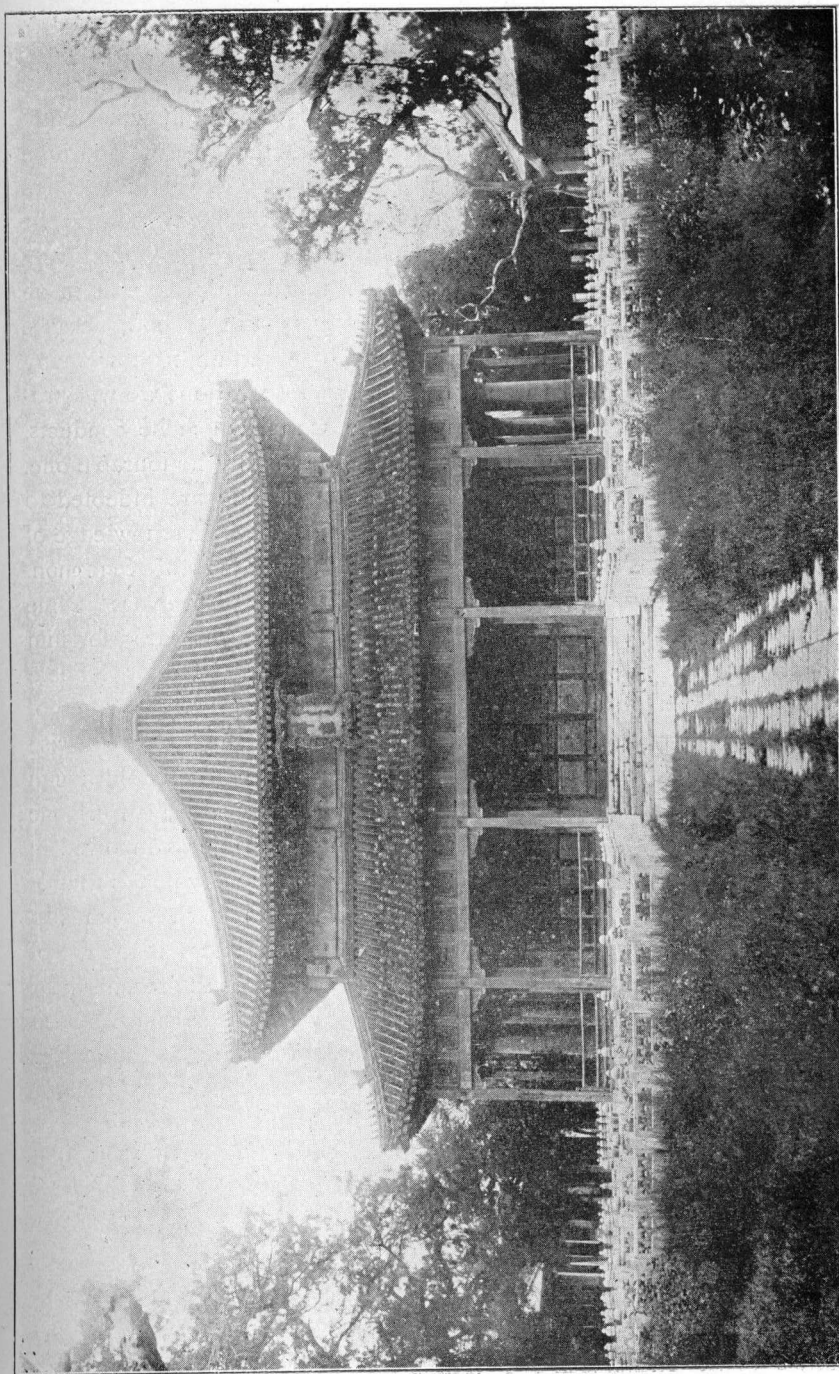
It must be remembered that the Chinese have always entertained a profound respect for learning. The opening sentence of the *Analects*, or *Memorabilia*, of Confucius, strikes the key-note for all the ages since. The Master said: "Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?"

In one point of view the title of this paper is a misleading one. Strictly speaking, there is not, and probably never has been, a "School System" in China. If there were one, the Empire of to-day would be very different from what it now is. Yet there is a method of instruction, which appears to be practically universal throughout China, wherever the people can afford to have schools at all. In some places and to a certain extent there are free, or charity, schools, to which pupils are admitted without the payment of tuition fees or for a merely nominal sum. The variety and the scope of Chinese charities are suprisingly great, and it certainly seem strange that, generally speaking, there are practically no endowed common schools, in place of the innumerable number of temples, the advantages of the former

being so obvious, and of the latter so obscure. The Chinese cherish a profound respect for antiquity, not equalled by that of any other race. Their regard for Confucius and Mencius is comparable to that of the Jews for Abraham and Moses. The Chinese do not indeed attribute divine inspiration to their sages, but if they did it could scarcely add to the admiration and reverence felt for them now and throughout all the ages of the past.

This suggests the problem: postulating such a universal respect for instruction as the Chinese entertain, which has found homogeneous and unrestricted expression for millenniums, how does it happen that the Chinese are not the most learned people in history? This is not a question which admits of an off-hand reply, yet it may be indirectly answered in the course of an outline inquiry into what Chinese education really is, what it is not, and in what respects it needs to be replaced by a better system. The latter topic will naturally fall mainly within the scope of papers other than the present.

The most important fact in relation to our subject may be said to be that, generally speaking, primary education among the Chinese is through the medium of private schools, having no relations whatever either to the national, provincial, or county government. Next to this fact is another of capital importance to a comprehension of Chinese instruction, to wit, that it is all based upon the supposition that every student is to become a candidate for the civil service examinations, conducted upon a stereotyped plan of literary composition based on an intimate acquaintance with the works ranked as classical, which, according as the list is less or more comprehensive, number from nine to thirteen. In aggregate bulk these, together with the Standard Commentary of Chu Hsi (A.D. 1130-1400) which must also be assimilated, may be roughly compared with the Old Testament. As all of this is literally to be engraved upon the tablets of the child's memory, it is necessary to begin at an early period of his intellectual development, and to keep up the process continuously for a long series of years, as nearly as possible without intermission, otherwise the results will rapidly evaporate. Another consideration must be taken into account, of which those living in Western lands have no experience. The Chinese language is composed of a vast and an unknown number of separate ideographs, called "characters," a few of which were originally intended as rude representations of material objects. Each of these characters must be separately learned by the pupil through an effort of memory. The recognition of the form and the name of the character is reached at one stage of his knowledge and an acquaintance with its meaning in the works where he has met it at quite another. Other and fuller significations are not acquired until long afterward.



HALL OF THE CLASSICS, PEKING.
IN THE COURT OF THIS BUILDING THE TEXT OF THE FOUR BOOKS AND FIVE CLASSICS IS CARVED ON STONE TABLETS THAT THEY MAY NEVER AGAIN BE DESTROYED AS THEY WERE BY CH'IN SHIH-HUANG, THE BUILDER OF THE GREAT WALL.

There is no method of "spelling," as in alphabetic tongues, by which the learner can help himself forward, thus in a sense knowing "how to read" as soon as he has learned correctly all the sounds of all the letters.

In China it is impossible to determine what "knowing how to read" connotes, since it is easy to recognize all the characters in a composition without in the least grasping their meaning as a whole. In this connection it may be observed that these conditions render an intelligent reply to the inquiry: "What proportion of the people of China can read?" practically impossible; first, because there can be no such standard in Chinese as in an alphabetic language of what "learning to read" means, and, second, because were there any such standard there is no way of ascertaining how many Chinese have reached it. With these introductory observations we will proceed to speak of the Chinese teacher, and of the school which he conducts.

The employment of schoolmaster is in itself a highly honourable one. Confucius and Mencius were primarily teachers, and they are indebted to their pupils for the perpetuation of their influence, just as a knowledge of the opinions and dicta of Socrates is largely due to the writings of Xenophon. Of the four classes into which the Chinese divide mankind "scholars" come first. It is quite as natural for "a scholar" to be a teacher as, later, for him to become an official, and the one is often the road to the other. There is in China no science of pedagogy. It is assumed, contrary to ages of experience and observation, that anyone who has learned can likewise teach. Every educated man is, therefore, a potential instructor, although he has probably never received from any human being so much as one suggestion as to the best means of accomplishing the objects involved in teaching. So far as he knows, there is but one way to teach, which is that of setting each pupil a "Stent," and, after he has been informed what sounds to utter, each one spends his time in bawling out the characters at the top of his voice to make sure that he is not idle, as well as to let the teacher hear whether the sounds have been correctly caught. When the lesson has been "learned," that is when the scholar is able to howl it off exactly as the master pronounced it, he stands with his back to the teacher and repeats (or "backs") the lesson in a loud sing-song tone until he reaches the end of his task, or the end of what he remembers, when his voice suddenly drops from its high pitch like a June beetle that has struck a dead wall.

His first manual is usually a little book called the "Trimetrical Classic," because it has three characters in each sentence or clause, composed eight centuries and a-half ago by a preceptor for his private school. Perhaps there are few compositions which have ever been so thoroughly ground into the memory of so many millions of the human race as this. It has often been

remarked that its opening sentence contains one of the most disputed doctrines of antiquity: "Men at their birth are by nature radically good; in their natures they approximate but in practice differ widely." Then follow several strong sentences emphasizing the necessity of the instruction of youth, succeeded by a characteristic Chinese mosaic on the progressive nature of numbers, the names of the heavenly bodies, the "three relations" between prince and minister, father and son, and man and wife; the four seasons; the four directions; the five elements; the five cardinal virtues; the six kinds of grain; the six domestic animals; the seven passions; the eight kinds of music; the nine degrees of relationship; and the ten moral duties. After this comes a general summary of the classical books which the pupil is to study as he goes on, with a catalogue of the names of the dynasties, concluding with the first of the present dynasty, where the list ends abruptly at the year 1644, or 260 years ago. The current dynasty is not considered in China a suitable subject for instruction—as if a class in English history were required to call a halt at the accession of the House of Hanover! The concluding section contains some items of human interest, such as that the great Confucius learned something from a child; that the ancient students had no books, but copied their lessons on reeds and slips of bamboo; that to vanquish the body they hung themselves by the hair from a beam, or drove an awl into the thigh; that one read by the light of a glowworm, and that another tied his book to a cow's horn. Among the prodigies of diligence were two, who, "though girls, were intelligent and well informed." The closing lines stimulate to exertion in study by many examples, such as the faithful watch-dog, the industrious bee, the diligent silkworm. "If men neglect to learn, they are inferior to insects," while "he who learns in youth, and acts when of mature age, extends his influence to the prince, benefits the people, makes his name renowned, renders illustrious his parents, reflects glory upon his ancestors and enriches his posterity." The list of "Hundred Surnames" must be committed to memory, after which follow the Four Books, that is, the Confucian Analects, the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the Works of Mencius. The order in which these are taken up varies in different places, but the method of study is as nearly as possible invariable. Perhaps the Book of Poetry may precede the Four Books, while the Book of History, the Book of Changes, and the historical work of Confucius known as the Spring and Autumn Annals follow. Book after book is stored away in the abdomen (in which the intellectual faculties are supposed to be situated) almost by the cubic foot, and if the pupil is furnished with the clue of half a sentence, he can unravel from memory, as required, yards, furlongs, or miles of learning. To commit to memory all these

volumes must in any case be the labour of many years. It is common to find scholars who have memorized the whole of the Four Books, and perhaps the Odes and the History, before they have heard any explanations even of the Trimetrical Classic, with which their education began. During all these years the pupil has been in a condition of mental daze, which is denoted by a Chinese character the component parts of which signify "a pig in the woods." His entrance upon study is called "lifting the darkness," and to teach the beginner is "to instruct darkness." These expressive phrases correspond to a fixed reality. Of those who have committed to memory all the books named, some of the brightest have no doubt, and as it were by accident, picked up an idea.

Thoughtful Chinese teachers, familiar with the capacity of their pupils, estimate that the most intelligent among them cannot be expected to understand a hundredth part of what they have memorized. The number of scholars which one teacher can instruct is limited in different ways. Each pupil is a class by himself, and though several of them happen to be studying the same passages at the same time, no one thinks it possible to combine their recitations. Their frequent absences and their unequal capacities would alone serve to prevent it. In rural regions, visits to relatives, theatricals, and the urgency of farm work continually call off the scholars. Truancy is common, and is often concealed or condoned. The teacher does not as a rule identify himself in any way with the interests of any of his scholars, unless their abilities are exceptional and their future appears likely to reflect glory upon their preceptor. The aim of the instructor is too often to do as little as he can and still keep his place, while that of the patrons of the school is to get the most they can for the least money. Thus it happens that, in the province where Confucius and Mencius taught, the occupation of teacher is one of the worst paid in the whole category of human activity. Yet his position as consultee-general to the whole neighbourhood, together with his ability to write letters, and to give advice in law cases, sometimes gives the teacher a certain dignity, irrespective of the pittance which is often his only support. On the other hand, a master who teaches the more advanced pupils in preparation for their examinations may, perhaps, receive the equivalent of several hundred Mexican dollars, but the number of such is very small. It is a dictum of the Trimetrical Classic that to instruct without severity is in the teacher a fault. While the Chinese are among the most patient people on earth, Chinese children are not so unlike others that traversing the barren deserts of potential learning could be expected to have for the young mind strong attractions. The teacher has no variety of studies to offer, no means of varying his rigid method by adaptation to the pupil's



THE CONFUCIAN TEMPLE, PEKING, IN THE COURT OF WHICH THE NAMES OF GRADUATES FOR THE PAST 500 YEARS HAVE BEEN CARVED ON STONE TABLETS.

comprehension or of developing his judgment. A Chinese pupil has indeed no use for judgment, but only for attention, which is cultivated to an admirable pitch so that he can study amid the greatest din without suffering diversion. It is essential that he should have a memory like that of a phonograph. His first and perpetual duty is to remember, and if he does not do so there is no way but for the teacher to beat him, sometimes with great and barbarous severity. Against this it is vain for the parent to remonstrate, even if so inclined, and as a rule, if he has himself been at school, he recollects how often he himself was beaten, and is reconciled to it as an inevitable incident in the laborious process of developing a student. If, on the other hand, he has never learned how to read, he at least recognizes that he knows nothing whatever about the matter. So in any case he generally keeps hands off. To a Westerner it is singular that the apparent interest of parents in the schools which their sons attend is so slight, but a consideration of Chinese habits of thought and life show how difficult and how useless any active interference would be. The teacher would say by his manner, if not in words, "What business have you here? Mind your own affairs, and leave mine to me." The hours of the ordinary Chinese schools usually comprise nearly the whole day from early dawn till about dark, and sometimes an evening session is added besides. However small or frail the pupil he is theoretically under the same restraint as the others. There are no "recesses" for relaxation, no inspiriting vacations for physical and intellectual recuperation, but, during the harvest season, the school must often be disbanded on account of need of help at home. Except for a month or so at the New Year season, the coldest winter and the hottest summer witnesses nothing but the same interminable monotony of Sisyphean grind. A part of the pupil's time is given to learning to write characters, of some difficulty for most scholars, involving great patience on the part of both teacher and pupil. But the characters set for "copy" are generally not those in common use, so that an excellent opportunity for useful review of previous acquisitions is wasted. The inditing of formal and especially of official or semi-official letters is in China a serious matter, requiring special training, but this, strange as it appears to us, is not afforded in the ordinary school, but must be gained, if at all, by a species of apprenticeship elsewhere. For this reason it is a common experience to find that a teacher who knows the Classics by heart, and who recognizes thousands upon thousands of characters, is unable to frame a letter to the local magistrate according to the usual forms.

There is another defect even more striking and fatal. Every one of these scholars will all his life have to deal with money in the shape of brass cash or of silver, and with a variety of accounts, some of

which are far from simple. For this an intimate familiarity with the more rudimentary arithmetical processes would appear to be indispensable. But nothing of the sort is taught in any Chinese school of the standard pattern. The teacher could not give the requisite instruction, for he has himself probably never gained it. If got at all, it must be picked up elsewhere, and is usually acquired in the shop of some merchant, or by the private teachings of an expert. Mention has been made of the cardinal fact that Chinese education or rather instruction—for such only it is—is pervaded through and through with the aim of passing certain examinations by composing prescribed essays. Yet, upon the average, it is next to certain that not three pupils in one hundred will ever carry their studies to this pitch, but that yet they will need a competent knowledge of common characters and the ability to write business Chinese. Why is no allowance made for such a vast preponderance of students? Chinese inbred conservatism prevents. The writer is cognizant of a typical case where a teacher, having literary rank, recognizing the futility of the usual routine for his pupils, introduced a more rational one, but the patrons of the schools violently protested and would have none of it! This illustrates the hopelessness of a change not introduced by virtual compulsion. Reference has been made to the great commentator, Chu Hsi, whose exposition of the Classics must be accepted by every pupil. This inevitably strangles inquiry and free thought before it has an opportunity to assert itself, and it is to this, more than to any other cause, that China owes its almost universal and hopeless acquiescence in everything past, simply because it always has been. Every inquirer who arrives at an understanding of what a typical Chinese school really is, must be impelled to raise the question how it can be that with such a system of "intellectual infanticide" the Chinese people have always exhibited so great mental vitality as we know to be the case. The only answer must be that this is not on account of their educational methods, but in spite of them. Each real scholar in China is the sole survivor of scores if not hundreds of those who have relatively if not absolutely failed. The ordinary pupil who does not go into trade simply "throws away" his learning, as the apt saying is, and forgets all about it. A small minority cherish fragments, and what the chemists term "traces," while a minute fraction contrive not only to keep what they so laboriously gained, but even to add a little to it. Upon the supposition that it is vitally important to learn by heart the whole series of Classics and the commentaries on them, perhaps the Chinese plan would be a necessary evil, for it would otherwise appear to pass the wit of man to accomplish a result so inherently useless. The present problem in Chinese education is how to pass from old ways to radically new ones with the least possible friction. The complete refutation of the age-long methods of the past is China itself.

To conserve its best intellectual results, and to set the Empire on a new course of thought and study must be the task of its ablest and most advanced thinkers. But all the impulse to such a course comes primarily from without. Every friend of China must wish it complete success.

Gems from the Tao Teh King of Lao Tszé.

HE who says himself that he can see is not enlightened.

THE finest weapons of war are implements of disaster.

THOSE who know they have enough are rich.

THE weakest things in the world subjugate the strongest.

FAITHFUL words are not pleasant; pleasant, or specious, words are not faithful.

NOW there are three things which I regard as precious, which I grasp and prize. The first is compassion; the second is frugality; the third is not venturing to take precedence of others—modesty.

TAOIST TEXTS